

“NO TE CREARON LAS GOLONDRINAS”: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POSSIBILITIES OF
COLLECTIVITY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This study is an investigation of the dynamics of the Chicago ACT (Artist Creating Transformation) Collective as a conduit through which we can better understand the generative possibilities of intergenerational everyday intersections of relationality. The Chicago ACT Collective's reciprocal study is rooted in love and built from a desire to transform unjust structures. This enables an expansive and collaborative approach to collectivity.

The Chicago ACT Collective uses dialogue and art-making as tools for research and reflection enabling a cyclical process of making and learning with and from each other and their broader networks. The majority of the work produced by the Chicago ACT Collective is created in collaboration with people, groups, and organizations who contribute to direct responses to current events and people centered movements. By publicly sharing their work, the Chicago ACT Collective invites opportunities to engage in continued dialogue as a group and with others in an effort to comprehend, deconstruct, and (re)imagine complex oppressive systems.

This investigation is organized in three parts. The first addresses the theoretical attunements and methodological orientations that have informed this investigation. I do this through a series of letters to the members of the Chicago ACT Collective. Following a spirit of collectivity and decolonial research practices, part two temporarily interrupts these letters to include the voices of members of the Chicago ACT Collective in the form of excerpts of transcribed conversations. In part three, I end the dissertation by returning to letter writing in order to share observations and reflections that emerged from these conversations.

The Chicago ACT Collective is one iteration of multiple forms of different spaces and communities the members inhabit. This interconnected structure enables a cultivation of energy, spirit, and collaboration that radiates and reverberates beyond the members of one community.

While we may learn to collaborate in various settings, this is not the same as deciding to form a group and be in purposeful relation with others. Each iteration of a collective composition reflects specific contextual dynamics; they are communities that challenge the illusion of individuality while simultaneously reflecting relational interdependence. The Chicago ACT Collective values interconnectedness and recognizes that by integrating the commonalities and differences of each member communities are far stronger than solitary units. Engaging in relational dynamics is a laborious practice and requires a fair amount of emotional, spiritual, and intellectual labor. Yet collective structures, exemplified through the Chicago ACT Collective, model how relationality predicated on love, trust, and mutual respect create the conditions that enable members to imagine and enact new visions for our world. This research, while situated in a singular group, offers important lessons applicable to a wide variety of spaces and contexts.

To all my relations, I am because you are.

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I.

CHAPTER 1: AN INTRODUCTION IN TWO PARTS

A Letter to the Doctoral Committee

Dear Dr. Lucero, Dr. Travis, Dr. Ruiz, and Dr. Reyes,

My research project builds from a desire to collaborate with members of the Chicago ACT (Artist Creating Transformation) Collective, a group of friends who are also artists, educators, and advocates of the arts. I am a member of this group and know first-hand that our reciprocal study, usually manifested through artistic interventions, is rooted in love and built from an impetus to transform unjust structures.

My mother used to tell me, “*No te crearon las golondrinas*,” which translates to, “you weren’t raised by swallows” (Rosa A. Valencia, personal communication, n.d.). This reminder was usually wielded in an attempt to curb my independent nature; but also served to instruct me on the relational interdependence to family, chosen family, friends, and more-than-human entities. Community and collective living were instrumental to my family’s survival in Mexico and more so after our immigration to the United States. I believe my mother wanted to make sure that I did not forget this important lesson in my rush to leave home and explore the world.

I have been shaped and informed by collective structures over the course of my life. The most recent and pronounced example of this influence has been my participation in the Chicago ACT Collective. This group is an arts-based collective; our members straddle a variety of roles and disciplines. In addition to being artists and advocates of the arts, we sustain ourselves and each other through work in higher education, as k-12 classroom teachers, as students, in community-based organizations, through museum education, philanthropy, and as teaching artists. Our collective structure means that we embrace each member as well as our respective families, and together we have formed a new family, a chosen family.

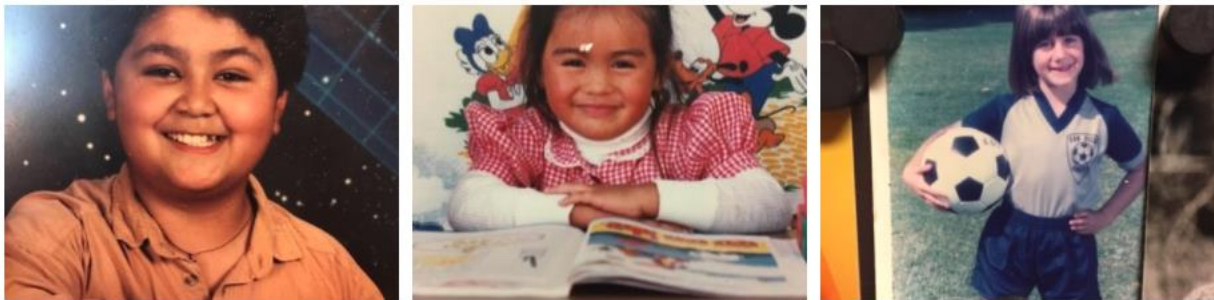
The Chicago ACT Collective was founded in 2016. Since our formation, we have supported one another in our individual and collective growth and holistic development. I deeply love and respect each and every member of this group, as well as their families. Allow me to briefly introduce you to the amazing people that make up the ACT Collective.

A Brief Introduction to Members of the Chicago ACT Collective

On the Chicago ACT Collective website (n. d.) you can find childhood pictures of our members. I will use the images to help structure the order of introductions. The brief narratives that follow begin to trace a woven tapestry of our interconnectedness. These descriptions are incomplete and are framed from my singular position. While I am aware of how some of our relationships overlap both within and outside of the collective, I cannot speak to the larger map of our relational dynamics nor the narrative orientations of other members of the group.

Figure 1

Childhood Pictures of Members of the Chicago ACT Collective



Note. From left to right: William Estrada, Paulina Camacho Valencia, Sarah Atlas (Chicago ACT Collective, n. d.).

William Estrada (Figure 1) is one of the ACT Collective's co-founders. In addition to being a partner to a magnificent person, he is a father to three incredible young people, and he is

also one of my favorite teachers. William has worked as an art educator in a variety of spaces. I became acquainted with William when I was in high school because he was my younger siblings' teacher at two different community art centers. William is currently an educator at an elementary school and university. He was my cooperating teacher during my preservice teaching experience and was instrumental in my decision to become a classroom teacher. William and I have shared students. When I worked as a teacher his elementary students became my students, and now my former high school students are his students at the post-secondary level. William has modeled and taught me the pedagogical importance of centering love, trust, generosity, vulnerability, critical play, and most importantly humor. William's artistic practice reflects these values and privileges collaborative and dialogic approaches to participatory socially engaged art (Estrada, n. d.). William is also part of the Justseeds Artists' Cooperative (n. d.) along with other members of the ACT Collective. William also has the best camping kitchen set up bar none.

Sarah Atlas (Figure 1) is also a co-founder of the ACT Collective. Sarah and William conceived the idea of forming an artist collective and applied for funding to support our formation. I met Sarah in early 2007 when she applied for, and secured a position, at a non-profit arts organization where I was employed. I left the organization to study abroad as Sarah was transitioning into her new role. Our paths frequently crossed at functions for the organization where we first met, but our friendship has developed as a result of our participation in the collective. Sarah has recently made the decision to leave her full-time job to focus on her graduate studies and co-parenting two amazing young people alongside Hilesh Patel, a collective member. She is a California transplant and holds down the west coast vibes.

Figure 2

Childhood Pictures of Members of the Chicago ACT Collective



Note. From left to right: Juan Carlos Pérez, Silvia Gonzalez, Amanda Cortés (Chicago ACT Collective, n. d.).

Juan Carlos Pérez (Figure 2) and I met at the information meeting inviting future members to join the Chicago ACT Collective. Juan Carlos moved from California for art school and made Chicago his second home. He worked as a teaching artist at various organizations for a number of years while simultaneously attending to his painting and installation art practice. Juan Carlos and William along with Jessica Mueller, another collective member, were teaching artists at the same elementary school while working for an arts integration organization. Juan Carlos has recently moved back to California to be closer to family and to support his partner's career goals. Juan Carlos is immensely generous with his feedback on artistic projects. He is an amazing cook, he makes bomb *esquites*,¹ and has a wide knowledge of spices.

I met Silvia Gonzalez (Figure 2) when she was a high school participant for a holiday card painting program at the same arts organization where I met Sarah. I was the teaching assistant for the course and got to know Silvia by helping her develop her watercolor painting

¹ Mexican street salad comprised of a corn, lime, cilantro, jalapeños, onion, garlic, cotija cheese, and mayonnaise.

skills. Silvia and I reconnected when she returned to Chicago after completing her undergraduate degree. We got together to catch up and to discuss graduate school options given that I had recently gone through the process of researching and applying for master's programs. Silvia and I continued to build our friendship and found ourselves collaborating on projects with mutual friends and mentors before being invited to join the ACT Collective. Silvia works as an elementary school art teacher. The love, commitment, and criticality she pours into her teaching practice is extraordinary. Silvia's artistic practice extends beyond teaching to include digital collage, photography, and painting as well as collaboration and dialogue. She has become a dear friend, travel companion, and dance floor co-conspirator.

Amanda Cortés (Figure 2) and I were introduced by Nicole Marroquin, a member of the collective. We were both surprised that our paths had not crossed earlier given the number of shared mutual acquaintances. Amanda humbly does not consider herself an artist, although I would argue otherwise. While she may not create through the conventional media typically associated with artists, Amanda's creativity, imaginative vision, and knack for strategic planning are a few of her many superpowers. Trained as a lawyer, Amanda leverages her knowledge of the judicial system and broad power structures to assist others in multiple capacities. Amanda and her partner, Eric J. García (also a member of the collective), have recently left our home base city but she remains deeply connected to a number of grassroots community development initiatives in Chicago. She is a magical unicorn that radiates infinite light and generosity. Amanda is also an avid hiker and mother to the newest member of the collective.

Figure 3

Childhood Pictures of Members of the Chicago ACT Collective



Note. From left to right: Jessica Mueller, Hilesh Patel, Vanessa Sanchez (Chicago ACT Collective, n. d.).

Jessica Mueller (Figure 3) is an interdisciplinary artist and educator. We met during the preliminary meeting Sarah and William organized inviting a number of people to form the collective. Jessica's pedagogical practice extends from community organizations to elementary through university learning space. She models collaboration through her teaching facilitation building vulnerable and trusting spaces where deep connectivity yields rich artistic content. Jessica is mother and artistic collaborator to two astounding young people. Her artwork explores issues of labor and domesticity mediated through her experience of motherhood.

Hilesh Patel (Figure 3) is our resident Piscean poet. He has worked in various roles within the broader scope of the arts and education. Hilesh has worked at a number of organizations in the capacity of teacher, teaching artist, program manager, program developer, and administrator. Hilesh models his belief in the integration of arts and justice through his work as well as in his daily practices. He is an immensely generous person and moves through the world with a poet and dancer's grace helping to orient others' attention to the quiet things that often go undetected. Hilesh is a father to two wonderful young people and partner to Sarah.

Vanessa Sanchez (Figure 3), fellow Taurean, is an artist and a fierce advocate and facilitator of creative youth spaces. Vanessa's magical and playful spirit along with her love for communities of young people are her armor against adultist traps and institutional bureaucracy. I officially met Vanessa when I was hired to be a teaching artist at the organization where she directs youth programs. Outside of the collective, Vanessa and I work with a group of friends to organize a free art and music festival in our predominantly Mexican and Mexican American neighborhood. She is also a member of Instituto Gráfico de Chicago (n. d.) along with other members of the collective. Vanessa is the original ride or die, a true homie that's not afraid to tell you like it is but also wrap you in love and support. She shows out on the dancefloor and cannot resist the sonic vibrations of house and freestyle music. Vanessa is also mother to a tender and radiant young person.

Figure 4

Childhood Pictures of Members of the Chicago ACT Collective



Note. From left to right: Eric Reyes, Karen Reyes, Eric García (Chicago ACT Collective, n. d.).

Eric Reyes (Figure 4) is a talented musician, sound engineer, and another unrelenting champion of creative youth spaces. I met Eric shortly after he and his partner, Karen (a member of the collective), returned to Chicago after a brief stint in New York. Eric and I briefly worked

at the same community organization. In addition to working to ensure creative spaces for young people across the city's libraries, Eric works with a coalition of parents to advocate for equitable public education for all children. He humbly rarely flexes his vast knowledge about a number of topics but will not hesitate to roast you with his sarcastic humor. During our weekly collective video calls Eric strums his guitar providing background musical scores to our gatherings. He steady shares relevant Twitter content, keeping me up to date on global news and memes. Eric also generously shares his collection of bourbon and whiskey, is an avid hiker, and parent to a brilliant young person.

Karen Reyes (Figure 4) is an artist, maker, scholar, and executive director of a community arts organization. We were introduced because Karen took over as teaching artist for a class I taught at a community organization where her partner, Eric, also worked. Our friendship blossomed through our participation in the ACT Collective. Karen is an unstoppable action-oriented force. She utilizes her wealth of knowledge, skills, and resources to make things happen. Karen works to remind people of their power, helping build others' confidence and capacity for self-sustainability. Karen brings humor and love to difficult work. She is a fierce advocate for disrupting all kinds of normative social constructs and this is reflected in all parts of her life and through her actions. Karen's generosity is unparalleled, she shares everything, her home, her skills, her resources of all kinds, and her undivided time and attention, with the members of her various communities. Karen's love for movement is inspiring and extends beyond organizing to physical exercise. She was my early morning running and swimming partner and motivated me to complete a triathlon. Karen loves the outdoors and is our unofficial-official collective camping coordinator. She is the mother of a remarkable young person.

Eric J. García (Figure 4) made his way to Chicago from The Land of Enchantment to complete his MFA. He is an incredible artist, educator, partner to Amada, and a new father. I followed García's work prior to meeting him through Amanda. I was drawn to the graphic style, political content, and historical reworkings of his prints, sculptural work, murals, and political cartoons. He uses poignant irony to address systems of power and white supremacy. His discipline and dedication to his practice is inspiring. García is also a member of three additional collectives: Instituto Gráfico de Chicago (n. d.), Justseeds Artist Cooperative (n. d.), and Veteran Art Movement (n. d.). As I got to know García I was deeply uplifted by the way his principles are not confined to his artwork and are reflected in every aspect of his life. I found this quality reassuring. García is a hilarious person and a down vato.

Figure 5

Childhood Pictures of Members of the Chicago ACT Collective



Note. From left to right: Rodolfo (Rudy) Esparza, Iván Arenas, Nicole Marroquin (Chicago ACT Collective, n. d.).

Rodolfo Esparza (Figure 5) is a self-professed ghetto philosopher. He is one of the most brilliant people I know, but I'm also biased because he is my partner. Rudy and I have been practicing reciprocal relational collectivity for a very long time. His brilliance, humor, and

effortless ability to connect with people are only a few of the many qualities that make him a luminous presence in my life. He also brews the best coffee and curates amazing playlists.

Iván Arenas (Figure 5) is an anthropologist, architect, artist, researcher, and parent to a lovely young person. Ivan and I were not acquainted prior to the formation of the ACT Collective, but I have enjoyed developing a friendship over the past five years. Ivan's life and movement through the world reflect his principles of creating and enacting sustainability and alternative political imaginaries. Ivan is involved in a number of organizing initiatives that span a variety of issues and keep him busy but connected to action-oriented work. He is a person of integrity and deep generosity. Ivan rides his bike everywhere, through every season, and is an avid runner.

Nicole Marroquin (Figure 5) has been an instrumental force in my life. She is a brilliant interdisciplinary artist, educator, and researcher. I first met Nicole in 2008 while she supervised preservice teachers at a high school where I coordinated community programs. Without imposing it on me, Nicole helped me realize that I had been an educator my entire life. These early conversations with Nicole prompted me to apply for a master's program with a teacher certification. She helped reframe schools as less intimidating places by helping orient my attention to the underlying imbalances of power in education that are interconnected with a wide scope of issues. Nicole reminded me that learning and classrooms can be fun and deeply transformational. After helping me navigate graduate school she generously invited me to collaborate on a variety of projects she organized. The most impactful being the Froebel curriculum² we co-developed and shared with my students over the course of five years. This

² A description of the Froebel curriculum can be found in Chapter 2 under the section "A Letter About Ideas that Prompted a Desire to Center Collective Structures as a Research Topic."

project in particular became the catalyst for my decision to return to graduate school and pursue a doctoral degree even though I swore I would never return to academia. Nicole's work overlaps with the interests and labors of many of the members of the collective and never hesitates to find ways to uplift others' projects and share resources. Nicole is one of the most brilliant people I have ever met and is deeply humble about her magical radiance. She is an inspiring artist, a gardener, fantastic cook, and an amazing mother to two incredible young people. Nicole is one of the most important teachers in my life and I am forever grateful that our paths crossed so many years ago.

An Abbreviated Review of the Research Plan

The work of the Chicago ACT Collective centers perpetual dialogue amongst ourselves and the people with whom we collaborate in order to disrupt hierarchical models of teaching and learning. We use art making as a research and reflection tool, enabling a cyclical process of making and learning with and from each other and our broader networks. The majority of the work we produce is created in collaboration with people, groups, and organizations, contributing to direct responses to current events and people centered movements. We believe that artistic articulations provide openings for connection and spaces from which to think, build, and work. By publicly sharing our work, we invite opportunities to have continued dialogue with ourselves and others in a way that helps us comprehend and deconstruct complex systems.

As a collective:

- We are intentional about maintaining fluid roles and expectations.
- We share these intentions with our partners to maintain transparency about our capacity and reach.

- We privilege interdisciplinary approaches and the intergenerational experiences of our members.
- We honor and respect the work of our collaborators and attempt to be mindful of systems of oppressive representation, working to avoid perpetuating unjust and reductive aesthetic forms.
- We attempt to avoid the colonial gaze of cultural appropriation and are intentional about the text and imagery that we use to shape and inform the work we produce and to which we contribute.

The dynamics of the ACT Collective can serve as a conduit through which we can better understand the generative possibilities and aesthetic forms of intergenerational everyday intersections of relationality. As a testament to the continued support from this amazing community, ACT Collective members have generously agreed to collaborate with me through a process of research-creation in order to help me complete the institutional requirements of a Ph.D. program.

The Chicago ACT Collective's reciprocal study is rooted in love and built from a desire to transform unjust structures, and this enables an expansive and collaborative approach to artmaking. The ACT Collective creates spaces that engage each member's imaginative capacity to dream of different worlds and that allow new visions to emerge, even at a small scale. What is emerging from the Collective can be mapped over arts education settings in a way that disrupts notions of individualism while cultivating community and fracturing oppressive systems of power.

As a collective we are attempting to create the future in the here and now. We are practicing and enacting our own speculative futures in the present. Holding temporary space to

rehearse, possibly fail, and try again so that we can test the boundaries, share, and collaboratively build and work toward other worlds. We don't need to wait for an elusive future to begin to test our ideas. This dissertation, while situated in a singular group, can offer important lessons that can be applied to other spaces and contexts. This particular dissertation project will be a reflection of the Chicago ACT Collective, but I hope that it can also be about so much more.

The collective is one iteration of multiple forms of different spaces and communities our members inhabit. I hope that through this inquiry process the members of the collective are able to weave a tapestry of the intersections we are a part of as individuals and as a cohesive group. This interconnected structure enables a cultivation of energy, spirit, and collaboration that radiates and reverberates beyond the members of one community. To help frame the vastness of the numerous possible approaches to collaborative research I have generated a few questions that can serve as entry points to this query. I ask: *What can an artist collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change? How can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning? What are the manifestations of being-with that extend beyond built communities? How do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

I have decided to organize this document in three parts. The first addresses the theoretical attunements and methodological orientations that have informed this investigation. I do this through a series of letters to the members of the Chicago ACT Collective. Following a spirit of collectivity and decolonial research practices, part two temporarily interrupts these letters to include the voices of members of the Chicago ACT Collective in the form of excerpts of transcribed conversations. Part two may feel uncomfortable for some readers because of the break in form. I considered reframing this section to be more in line with pedagogical

interpretative methods. However, this dissertation is very much written with the collective.

While I remain the sole author of this document, I view every member of the collective as having input and authority over this work. In this vein, I opted not to introduce the collective twice but to break in form for Part Two. This move is in congruence with the methodologies and theories I think with and live within. In part three, I end the dissertation by returning to letter writing in order to share observations and reflections that emerged from these conversations.

Many thanks,

Paulina

Figure 6

A Photograph of (Most) of the Members of the Chicago ACT Collective



Note. This picture was taken during a camping trip, May 2017.

A Letter About My Early Introduction to Collective Structures

Querides³ amigas,⁴

I don't know how much I've shared with you all about my past and my early orientations to collectivity. I want to share a fraction of my narrative to give you a better sense of the foundations that my family and early communities created that prepared me for our work together.

After my family made the decision to officially move to the United States, to relocate our lives, to attempt to grow roots in a location not entirely unfamiliar, but also not home, our small apartment and various living spaces were always shared with other family members. Living collectively was a given as immigrants to a new country. More adults meant more people to share the various household responsibilities. This form of living was common in my hometown in central Mexico. Family structures morphed according to various life events and needs. Adaptability was key for survival and social and cultural norms were secondary. My grandmother could care less about local gossip as long as her and her sisters' children had a roof over their heads and warm meals. Sometimes they all shared one roof or took care of each other's children for long periods of time. These values were not fixed in a geographic location and were brought over to the United States along with a few material possessions in the early 1990s.

My parents rented a small house in a pocket between Back of the Yards and West Englewood on the south-side of Chicago after attempting to fit multiple families in a series of small apartments that inevitably felt too cramped. This house became the family's central

³ "Querides" is an inclusive non-gendered form of "queridas" or "queridos" in the Spanish language.

⁴ "Amigues" is an inclusive non-gendered form of "amigas" or "amigos" in the Spanish language.

gathering location and also point of contact for many seeking to make a similar transition to life in the US. In this house I learned many more things than I have time to detail, but one of the most profound lessons was the power of collective living. Our home was sectioned off and each family, or young adult had their own room. We shared the kitchen, bathroom, and living room, provided no one was using it as a temporary bedroom. The adults took turns caring for each other's kids, cooking meals, cleaning the house. I learned that many hands really do make any load lighter. I was never bored, having so many options of people to play with and learn from outside of my immediate family. This living arrangement was fun as a child, but I know that it was not without its own difficulties. The people to bathroom ratio was not ideal, there was little privacy for the adults, and everyone was always in everyone else's business, all of the time. This structure was always intended to be temporary, while everyone settled into this new country. But in my young and limited understanding I was saddened when our once full home began to feel big and empty. With time, everyone moved out and our family relocated to a newly purchased apartment building down the street. Our home might not have been at full capacity at all times, but our extended family and friends filled our apartment and backyard every weekend and on holidays, including the insignificant ones. We recreated the closeness for a few hours each week.

It wasn't until I decided to move over 2,000 miles away, to the Bay Area as an undergraduate student that I began to understand the power and the beauty of my family as my first example of a community. I want to be careful to not over romanticize this structure. I know and understand through my own lived experience that as much love and support as I received, there was also a fair amount of anger, pain, and frustration that stemmed from my family. Ideological and cultural differences caused many arguments and disagreements. Not everyone

could be fully themselves. Any sign of straying from cultural values or assimilating to our new environment was criticized and made a topic of conversation and intervention. There was a lot of pressure in different forms. Families can do that, they can be a source of love, but with what often felt like numerous conditions, and my family was no different. I struggled to claim my personhood against my parent's expectations. I was lucky to have a loving family, this is not the case for everyone, and this was made clearly apparent to me as a young person. But that was what I knew, loyalty to family, and a dedication to fight to protect that structure for our collective survival. When survival was no longer such a pressing concern our focus turned beyond survival, to support one another to thrive, to live out our role and contribute toward the attainment of the myth of meritocracy. The children were expected to reap what our parents had sowed. I wasn't a firm believer in that dream, even as a child, but I also saw that it helped our family strive and set loftier goals. I did not subscribe to the myth, but it was imposed on me in multiple forms and also caused frequent ruptures between myself and my family.

As a pre-adolescent I could already see the ways in which power and hegemonic structures dictate the material conditions of the lives of many and extended to limit options and opportunities. Things did not add up, the amount of labor, lack of sleep, work ethic that I saw my family pour out was not balanced by the return or more importantly, the respect and value for our being/humanity. Gendered dynamics frustrated me, and I fought against them as much as I could before dodging a flying spatula as a final warning from my mother to please just stop arguing and help her establish some sort of temporary order to our home. Once I could detect imbalances, I began to see them everywhere, woven into the fabric of my life. Felt, present, shaping my experiences, but also so normalized to a point where not everyone else around me was aware or cared to look.

My emerging awareness presented a tension between my desire to learn and my frustration with the structures and conditions of my educational setting. My formal education wasn't fulfilling my curiosity and was not able to offer answers to questions I wasn't yet able to form. I rejected the idea of school but could never quite turn my back on it fully. Doing so would invalidate the numerous sacrifices my parents made for me, for my future. Education possessed its own mythical force and possibility for salvation. The American Dream and education were closely connected for my parents. For my parents, education offered an escape from our working-class conditions. My mother was denied the opportunity to travel and study, and she wanted to make sure the same opportunities were not withheld from her children. And so, to please my parents, I learned how the system worked and rather than push and fight against the system in place, I adapted to the restrictions.

I am not advocating for either current educational systems or for the American Dream. But these two institutions were tangled and interwoven in my parents' imagination. Education promised the most direct path toward achieving the immigrant success story they strove to achieve. I did not believe in either, but I loved my parents and did not want to invalidate their struggles and sacrifice. I did what I could. I gave them what they wanted, good grades, and I got what I wanted, freedom and independence to explore and learn in my own way, through experience.

I wasn't a terrible student. By traditional standards I was considered an exceptional student. I was enrolled in gifted programs. I got better than average grades and started doing better toward the end of high school. My solution to the boredom I experienced in the classroom was to look outside of school for supplemental learning. I learned how the school system functioned and utilized the structure to my benefit. Of course, there were compromises, but it

baffled my teachers how a student with good grades had terrible attendance and general participation. But I was bored and disliked the structure of school. I understood as early as second grade that certain pedagogical approaches did not work for me. I found that I preferred to make things and talk with people. I preferred hands on learning and opportunities to connect my learning outside of the four walls of the classroom.

These lessons that I learned from my family and our collective living laid an important foundation for the rest of my life. I love working with people, learning from others, being in conversation. I find that there are important lessons here that can be transferred to learning spaces, but also that can extend beyond institutions. We have been told that success is achieved individually. So many narratives reinforce the idea that we cannot trust or rely on others. Yet, this fallacy is a strategy to continue to divide and conquer those who exist outside of the hegemonic center. If we can make small, incremental changes inside of institutions, they add up and can make significant change over time. But also, we need to be able to plan multifaceted interventions. This requires that we look to spaces outside of school for where learning is already taking place and leverage relationships to continue and promote learning at different levels and spaces. Doing so might help generate a sort of porosity of the current barriers that starkly divide schools and communities. Even though there are community-based organizations that attempt to help serve as a bridge between schools and communities, they are also part of the nonprofit industrial complex and struggle to fully enact their mission because of various funding streams and potential conflicts of interest. Still, we need to think about how this work can be enacted in multiple sites and how we can open up institutions to be less rigid and oppressive.

Our current social, political, and economic moment is opening up the path for many people to more seriously consider sustainable forms of living. We are often not ready or open to

shifting our attention to the numerous inequities that shape our life. This is a result of either directly benefiting for existing systems, or fear of possible retribution from the state for attempting to intervene. Even though we can point to a number of victories won by marginalized communities over time, it often feels as though the losses outnumber the accomplishments. The defeats are brutal and leave a lingering sting. However, for many who feel they are already at the bottom of their rope, attempting to grasp on with sweaty hands, there is no option other than to fight or let go and accept defeat. Resilience and grit are often used as remedies to the consequences of marginalization. However, these concepts, specifically grit, are premised in colonial practices that are used as tools of control and acceptance of structures as they are. Narratives of grit as strength and adaptability obscure oppressive systems as the problem and puts the onus on the individual for not being able to thrive in a system that was never intended for our collective success. The Darwinian order of survival of the fittest was constructed under reductive frameworks that have become normalized and keep us from pointing to the bigger issue, the abuse of power and control. It is typically not until we are directly impacted by oppressive structures that we begin to question the systems in place. Marginalized communities feel the direct impact of systems of oppression at multiple and intersecting levels and might feel unable to directly impact these structures. Expanding our notions of research and documentation allow us to collect and share a variety of narratives of communities working to decentralize systems of power while creating people-centered sustainable solutions. These stories might serve as examples or motivation for others seeking to forge alternatives to our current conditions.

Collective structures push us to question the way liberal humanist notions of individuality have contributed to fracturing communities and our hesitation to trust one another and work from a space of generative difficulty and difference. That same root leads many to maintain

individuality at all costs. Minoritized people are rarely allowed opportunities to be ourselves outside of self-constructed often not easily detected spaces; to be seen and held in all of our beautiful and often contradictory intersections and multiplicities. But learning to return to our communal and collective community structures does not mean relinquishing our sense of self. I believe that this type of structure teaches us more about ourselves and helps us better grasp how we are a composite of several woven and intermingled relationships. These relationships include the land and animate as well as inanimate matter.

Collectives formed by historically marginalized communities enact a *brown commons* that performance and cultural theorist José E. Muñoz (Muñoz et al., 2020) wrote about. He states:

...What makes them brown, is partially the way in which they suffer and strive together but also the commonality of their ability to flourish under duress and pressure. They are brown in part because they have been devalued by the world outside their commons.

Their brownness can be known by tracking the ways through which global and local forces constantly attempt to degrade their value and diminish their verve. But they are also brown insofar as they smolder with a life and persistence: they are brown because brown is a common color shared by a commons that is of and for the multitude. (Muñoz et al., Chapter 1, para. 1)

Our collective structure is a reflection of the *brown commons*. We are united through various intersecting experiences of marginalization and a desire to reconfigure the forces that have created oppressive hierarchies of all kinds. Muñoz further explains that the unifying power of the *brown commons* is evidenced through interdependence; this boundless interconnectedness is something we believe in and practice as a group. I hope that in sharing a bit about myself, I am

able to point to the people and values that have laid a foundation for my contributions to our work and relational becoming. Studying intentional community structures can be significantly informative and can teach us more about the various iterations of collectivity.

I would like to explore what we stand to learn from collective structures. *Our shared investigations enable an expansive and collaborative approach to artmaking. What is emerging from the collective can be mapped over arts education settings in a way that disrupt reductive notions of individualism while cultivating community and fracturing oppressive systems of power. We create spaces that engage each member's imaginative capacity to dream of a different world and that allow new visions to be enacted, even at a small scale.*

I have prepared a few preliminary questions that are not finite but help offer a place from which to begin a collaborative research project. I ask: *What can an artist collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change? How can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning? What are the manifestations of being-with that extend beyond built communities? How do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

I have written a series of letters that I hope will articulate how I understand a fraction of our work within a larger genealogy of thinkers, artists, and educators. These letters and my writing are one of many openings through which to understand our formation and our collective work. Thank you for trusting me and agreeing to support my curiosities.

Con un chingo de amor,

Pau

At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality.

— Ernesto "Che" Guevara

We need conditions that enable us to act collaboratively to create communities that both support our abilities and nurture our interdependencies.

— The Care Collective

Look closely at the present you are constructing: it should look like the future you are dreaming.

— Alice Walker

CHAPTER 2: A SERIES OF LETTERS ABOUT THE METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATIONS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

A Letter About Rope as a Metaphor for Collectivity

Amigues⁵ del alma,

I am beyond grateful that the individual threads of each of our lives have become woven together to create the foundation for the Chicago ACT Collective. I consider myself extremely lucky because, in addition to being born into a supportive family unit, I can also count each of you and your respective families as part of my extended family. I know that, for some, the notion of family carries negative connotations. Families can be toxic and violent in countless ways. However, if we are lucky, our families can offer safety and comfort. I consider it a gift that you have chosen me as I have chosen you to be a part of each other's lives. Through our formation, we are also redefining the concept of family and kinship as solely understood through direct ancestry and biological relationships. We are an example for future generations—your children and my niblings⁶—that family does not have to be defined and measured against restrictive, hegemonic, and gendered parameters. Instead, I hope that we can continue to learn from and model what it means to be in community and deeply care for ourselves and each other. Platonic love does exist and can be shared and displayed with vulnerability and beauty.

Years ago, in one of Nicole's classes⁷, one of my peers taught the class how to make rope.

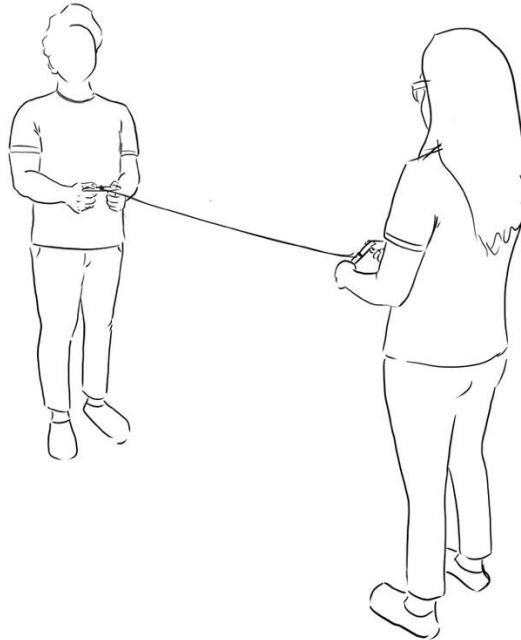
⁵ See footnote 3.

⁶ A gender-neutral term to refer to the children of your siblings in place of niece and/or nephew.

⁷ Nicole Marroquin is an associate professor of art education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is also a member of the Chicago ACT Collective and was my advisor and professor during my teacher education program.

Figure 7

Illustration of the Rope Making Process



- The manual process requires two people to stand opposite one another and spin the rope material, which can consist of fibers, threads, plastic bags, really anything that will comply with the process, in opposite directions.
 - The material should be mounted on a support such as a pencil, paintbrush, a stick, or dowel rod, anything that can hold the knotted threads at each end.
 - The key is to maintain tension between the opposite ends of the rope material.
- The amount of time spent twirling depends on the desired length of the final product, a longer rope will require more time.
 - That time is usually filled with conversation, giggles, sometimes frustration if the rope slips off of the support structure.

- That time allows for the two people involved in the activity to connect, to collaborate, and talk through the process.
- After the rope material has been spun enough to create tension such that the fibers begin to wrinkle or fold back onto itself the rope needs to be folded in half.
 - This step might require a third person depending on the length of the desired rope, but can also be done with just two people.
 - The two opposite ends are joined together while someone holds the middle section of the rope.
- The tension that was created by spinning the threads causes the rope to form, twisting and reshaping individual strands into a stronger collective unit.

Recently, while reading to prepare my preliminary exam I came across a metaphor for knotted threads as an analogy for being in community (Tarr, 2010). The knots served as an example of how each individual thread maintains its own integrity while being entangled with other discrete fibers. This made me think about the process of learning to make rope, and about our collective. Knots can be created by a single person, but collaboration is necessary when making rope. While it is preferable to do this with two people, a single person can participate with assistance from a support structure such as a doorknob. A relational dynamic ensues through this process, either between two people or a person and an inanimate object. The separate threads that make up a rope still maintain their own structure but become more powerful and resistant once joined together in a new form. I think that there are parallels here that can help us better understand people centered movements, as well as our collective.

One of the many things I love about our collective is how we metaphorically and literally embrace and hold one another as individual people but also understand the responsibility that

comes with being in community. We understand that we impact one another profoundly. I told someone recently that this is the healthiest relationship I've ever had. While it was meant as a joke, there is truth in that statement. I think that, because we deeply believe in and understand that we are individual threads that have chosen to become entwined with one another, we don't take this for granted and we also understand the responsibility that comes with this arrangement. The beauty of the rope making process is that each contributing strand is still clearly visible, as opposed to perhaps being hidden in a knotted structure. Similarly, each member of our collective is accepted as we are, in all of our complexity, and we try to make time and space for each other without eclipsing anyone.

This is not to say that we don't have disagreements, or that tension does not exist. Like the rope making process, I have seen us work through tension in ways that yield generative results and strengthen our group. To insinuate that we are without our own collective structural challenges would be to idealize our group and to flatten the intricacies of what it means to be in relational community. This acknowledgment helps us better understand that we have collectively built something powerful, beautiful, and deeply meaningful to each of us. We are stronger together. Our commitment to each other means that we help to support our individual growth outside of the collective, because we understand that this only serves to strengthen our community.

Rope is not indestructible. Depending on its structure and use it will wear and tear. This is an unavoidable result of use or age. However, Christina Sharpe (2016) reminds us that matter is never fully destroyed, it is reconstituted in a different form and holds memories. Rope can be repurposed, reconstituted, or left to erode. What we have built is not everlasting. It is beautiful and important and temporary. The impermanence of our group is one motivator for attempting to

capture a small fraction of our whole, but the broader resonance of sharing what we have collectively built is my primary inspiration.

I know that, because of the impact you have all had on my life, my research will undeniably include traces of your brilliance and magic. However, those possible insinuations would feel incomplete or risk further mistranslation if they are strictly articulated by one person. Instead of trying to force a research structure that circles around our collective, I have asked you all—and you have agreed—to engage in this process with me. I want you to know that I do not take this responsibility lightly. I know that this journey on which we are about to embark carries significant weight given the context of this work.

I cannot reiterate enough the gratitude I feel for each of you and our collective. Thank you for agreeing to embark on this research process with me, you are all magical unicorns that radiate infinite light and love.

Con cariño,

Pau

A Letter About Reciprocal Relational Exchange

Querides⁸ corazones,

I am because we are. This is an ancient concept that was reintroduced to my current consciousness through the writing of Luis Valdez, a Chicano writer, actor, film director, and co-founder of El Teatro Campesino. Valdez's (1990) poem, "Pensamiento Serpentino," addresses the Mayan concept *In lak'ech*, *Hala ken*, which speaks to the collective and relational processes of being and becoming. Valdez interpreted this concept as such:

Tú eres mi otro yo...

Si te hago daño a ti,

Me hago daño a mi mismo.

Si te amo y respeto,

Me amo y respeto yo. (pp. 173-174)

This is translated as:

You are my other me...

If I do harm to you,

I do harm to myself.

If I love and respect you,

I love and respect myself.

As an adolescent, Valdez's poem helped articulate some of the thoughts and struggles I contemplated as I began to reflect on my personhood. The Mayan notion of *In lak'ech* profoundly spoke to me and I have continued to hold this lesson close as I move through life. In this concept I found sense and reason for not only who I was but also who I was becoming, and

⁸ See footnote 3.

more importantly who I wanted to be. This idea allowed me to understand my development and that this process is relational, informed not only by the people in my life, but also by the context of my experiences, and my interactions with animate and inanimate beings and material. I will admit that I don't actually care very much for the poem itself. However, I do appreciate the introduction of the Mayan notion of *In lak'ech* to my way of thinking and being. This concept parallels other Indigenous beliefs such as *Mitakuye Oyasmin* from the Lakota people, which translates to "we are all related" (Anzia, 2010). This Indigenous understanding of relationality is not exclusive to the Lakota people.⁹ These approaches to how we understand our development and situate ourselves in relation to others are ancient practices that have persisted across time and in spite of history. These beliefs, as well as the people who first articulated and continue to practice them, are not fixed in the past. They carry relevance and important teachings that continue to be applicable in our current moment and beyond.

Afro-futurist speculative fiction author Octavia Butler (1995) offers a similar approach to understanding our emergent and iterative relational development. Butler opens the first chapter of her transformational novel *Parable of the Sower* with the following lines:

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

The only lasting truth

⁹ One of my favorite podcasts, *All My Relations*, hosted by Matika Wilbur & Adrienne Keene (2019-present) asked listeners to call in and share translations for the phrases "all my relations" or "we are all related" in their own Indigenous language. Episode number nine, "Can Our Ancestors Hear Us?" aired a collage of messages in case you want to listen and hear the beautiful voices for yourselves.

is Change. (Butler, 1995, Chapter 1, para. 1)

Butler's articulation invites us to consider the process of iterative personal and collective transformation through the senses and beyond. Here, touch is evoked offering a slightly more specific yet equally expansive opening through which to consider the multiple layers and strands of the often difficult to illustrate notion of relationality. Touch is understood as the literal physical act of tactile encounter, but also as a point of contact or intersection, as well as through feeling and affect. The words touch and change can be understood as both a noun and a verb, with multiple interpretations and functions. Theorist Hypatia Vourloumis (2015) conceptualizes tactility as a durational practice of world making and connectivity. What I most appreciate about Butler's (1995) approach to relational dynamics that is echoed by Vourloumis (2015), which is not as clearly evident in Valdez's (1990) interpretation of the Mayan concept *In Lak'ech*, is the reminder that this is an ongoing process, change is articulated as constant. Through this slight reorientation, we are offered a more capacious and forgiving consideration of a fluctuating process.

Our formation and work as the Chicago ACT Collective teaches us about the movement between a noun and verb. Our desire for action functions as motivation to release ourselves beyond the noun realm. We find ways to enact our visions for a different world. Our time together helped me better understand world making as an emergent process fueled by love and connection.

It is through these concepts of being with and becoming that I approach all of my interactions and especially how I situate my role as an artist, educator, and member of our collective. You have all helped to shape me, and I carry you all with me now and forever. Con cariño,

Pau

A Letter About Decolonial Research

Camarades,¹⁰

As a collective, we are aware of and discuss the dangers of colonial research practices. These conversations come up frequently, and not always related to how we plan and execute our collaborative work. Decolonial research practices function as theoretical and practical guides in our own work as we endeavor to distance ourselves from imperial research practices. I understand decolonial research as articulated by Indigenous feminist scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), Eve Tuck (2009), and Kim TallBear (2014). I will share with you some of the thoughts that most resonate with me and that I feel align with our proposed collective project.

Smith (2012) points to the ways that knowledge and power are and have been deeply intertwined. Both knowledge and power work to sustain and obscure enduring imperialist structures. In educational settings this is achieved through the validation of certain forms of knowledge and research and the invalidation of ways of knowing that are not solely centered in notions of reason and positivism. The lasting effects of colonialism in educational settings are obscured through the framing of these practices as relegated in the past. However, imperialism continues to shape our current context as we have inherited practices rooted in imperial and colonial frameworks. This is not to imply that alternatives don't already exist or that we cannot alter these structures, but that we need to recognize these relationships if we are to effectively

¹⁰ "Camarades" is an inclusive non-gendered form of "camaradas" which translates to comrades.

move away from such practices without inadvertently reinforcing oppressive approaches to research.

Admittedly, I had a brief moment of hesitation. I questioned whether my own use of decolonial methodology might function as a sort of commandeering of Indigenous practices. Tuck & Yang (2012) clearly articulate the dangers of misappropriating decolonization as a metaphor. When researchers misuse decolonization as a metaphor and not a tangible and concrete strategy for the repatriation of Indigenous land and lives while dismantling colonial structures, we reinscribe colonial frameworks (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 3). As a consequence, “when metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 3). My initial doubt dissipated as I quickly reminded myself that my own uncertainty was rooted in internalized colonial structures. My interest in working from a decolonial framework aligns with Indigenous goals to dismantle colonial structures and collectively imagine and create alternatives to systems of centralized power. Additionally, I am motivated to return the land to its stewards and to halt the continued genocide of Native communities. Rather than contribute to the continuous silencing and erasure of Indigenous voices in academic research, centering such voices is a political act. Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown (personal communication, 2019) reminded me that there is power in citational practice. Research can help amplify voices and methods that have been historically dismissed or erased. Researchers cannot wait for educational institutions to initiate changes that deviate from the existing frameworks. Instead, how we approach and frame our inquiry projects can aid in the representation of diverse voices and theories and help move away from colonial research practices. The decision to frame this project through decolonial methodology is intentional. I will

continue to look toward my initial hesitation as a guide throughout the research process to challenge myself to reflect on the consequences of my position and actions.

Smith (2012) proposes decolonial approaches to research as an entry point through which we can begin to push against the boundaries of institutional research. This is echoed by Tuck (2009) through the work of Sandy Grande (2004) who insists that an analysis of power and colonization is central to feminist Indigenous research practices. Smith (2012) explains that decolonial researchers need to address two critical aspects of how we frame and navigate our investigations. Smith asks us to challenge illusions of authenticity and prompts us to analyze the process and effects of colonization past, present and future. Notions of authenticity work to reinforce positivist approaches to knowledge and research. A consequence of the pretense of authenticity is that important and often varied contextual differences are erased or minimized. Such reductive frames reinforce notions of universalism that decolonial research aims to disrupt.

Smith (2012) explains that imperialism and colonialism are interrelated concepts, however colonialism is clarified as one manifestation of imperialism. Working to understand colonialism serves as a reminder that we are still directly impacted by imperialist systems both old and new. Smith challenges post-colonial framings of theory and research as they imply that we have moved past colonial structures, this averts our attention from addressing the root causes that have created and sustained oppressive dynamics. Challenging authenticity and colonialism inevitably elicit us to deal with power's multiple manifestations. We are asked to suspend our reliance on existing institutional approaches to research and instead implement methodological orientations that move away from colonial research practices.

Decolonial and feminist approaches to research parallel Black feminist understandings that the personal is political and researchers can never be fully objective or impartial (Taylor,

2017). Epistemology is linked to ontology, how we understand ourselves and our becoming is shaped by systems of knowledge. What we know and believe will shape our perceptions of ourselves and others. This is an important note of caution as we are not always fully aware of how our thinking has been impacted by systems of power and colonization.

One approach to help mitigate researcher's potential myopia as we work to expose systems of power is critical self-reflection. This iterative process was introduced to the field by educational theorist Paulo Freire (1968) as praxis. Freire's approach to popular education centered learning on the interests and observations of student with the hope that by investigating their environments, students ultimately make connections to larger social issues and work toward changing the oppressive structures that sparked their initial curiosity. Praxis is enacted as a cyclical process of action and reflection (Freire, 1968). Without critical reflection there is less incentive to reapply findings to the original context and learn from the research process. Praxis situates critical reflection as an opportunity to reframe the initial line of inquiry and prompts the researcher to continuously consider their position and impact. There is no definitive end to the line of research; the participants decide when they have exhausted their line of inquiry or capacity to continue their investigation. However, action can become stagnated without critical self-reflection. This might be a difficult and painful process for some as we are asked to contend with how we might benefit or are excluded from certain privileges and positions of power.

Smith (2012) and TallBear (2014) cite Donna Haraway's (1991) invitation to *stay with the trouble*. If we are open to it, discomfort can teach us much about ourselves and the world. We are not perfect, to assume so would be to promote universalism that erases important and beautiful differences and ignores how systems of power have created hierarchies amongst people based on various intersectional identifiers. Such divisions have tangible material consequences

and inform the types of opportunities available to people. A critical self-awareness is more than linguistic or political correctness. We are asked to suspend reductive one-dimensional notions of people and systems of power. Engaging in decolonial research practices is about exposing and challenging systems of knowledge and power and how we are all implicated in these structures while simultaneously creating alternatives to the apparatuses that are currently in place. However, researchers may not always be able to fully understand their own complicity within colonial frameworks.

Tuck (2009) challenges us to suspend further damage imposed by well-intentioned colonial research practices. In addition to critical self-reflection noted above, how we collaborate with research participants is important. Many subjects of research have been repeatedly exploited and stripped bare yet simultaneously made invisible by the existing research structures (Smith, 2012). Framing participants as subjects imposes an exploitative colonial gaze. However, Tuck (2009) and TallBear (2014) note that when communities are active participants in research and the construction of knowledge there are more opportunities for the applicability of varied methods of research as well as representation of findings. TallBear (2014) proposes that researchers position themselves as collaborators who research *with* participants rather than approaching this work as researching *about* subjects. This is an important shift as it opens up the researcher and the investigation process to be shaped and informed by all who participate rather than by the researcher alone. Approaching research as a collaborative process helps diminish hierarchical boundaries between researcher and participants. Additionally, collaboration with participants allows us to disrupt the illusion that researchers know what is right for their participants and minimizes the threat of imposing our assumptions on communities (TallBear, 2014; Tuck, 2009). If a community is willing to open themselves up for investigation, the

researcher should reciprocate this generosity and be willing to be adaptable and flexible throughout the process. This means that the research process will need to remain open to revision according to participant input. Further, vulnerability from the researcher is important to establish trust. As a researcher and educator, I would never ask research collaborators or students to do something I would not feel comfortable modeling myself. However, this does not mean that research participants will automatically be inclined to replicate something I propose. To that effect, researchers should be observant to how generative refusals can be invitations to reassess the research process (Tuck & Yang, 2014a). While there is no guarantee that researchers will completely suspend colonial approaches to research, a decolonial orientation to inquiry helps to center an analysis of power and colonization throughout the investigation and analysis process. Decolonial research methodologies help model important and powerful alternatives to colonial research practices.

The preliminary research questions I have articulated in a previous letter, “A Letter About My Early Introduction to Collective Structures,” are entry points for our work together, they are not fixed and are subject to change. I am committed to a collaborative research process. While I am working to shape the initial framework of our project, my conceptualization is heavily informed by our previous work and our time together. Research has already inflicted enough damage to multiple communities. I am committed to working together to avoid exploitative research practices. We cannot wait for someone else to develop critical consciousness and self-reflexivity to speak on our behalf. Smith (2012), TallBear (2014), and Tuck (2009) contribute to the conceptualization of decolonial research as it offers an opportunity to construct a more complex and populated cartography of knowledge.

Decolonial research resists a normalization of the inquiry process. Even though some researchers are engaging in investigation through educational institutions, decolonial research moves us to understand difference, complexity, and contradictions as launching points for further research. Our investigations are partial. Research projects can only ever offer a snippet of complex issues. The Chicago ACT Collective is a dynamic group, and this research project can only address a fraction of who we are, what we do, and how we engage our work. Our collective participation in this project might help offer one example, to what collaborative research and collective structures can teach us and test the boundaries of institutional forms of knowledge.

Con cariño,

Pau

A Letter About Research-Creation

Querides¹¹ amigues,¹²

In attempting to expand definitions of research to include more capacious approaches that amplify examples of decolonial understandings of knowledge, I would like to invite you all to participate in a process of research-creation.

I understand research-creation to be a hybrid form of inquiry. Within an institutional framework, it is an approach to research that aims to offer distance from and reworking of imperial approaches to theories of knowledge, or epistemology in the language of the academy. While research-creation may seem like a *new* method, it existed prior to the creation of the current structures that function as gatekeepers to non-institutional forms of knowing and understanding. The practice of research-creation builds on ancient approaches to research that have been systematically erased and invalidated. This methodological orientation leans on old and already existing approaches to research and echoes similar methodological alignments articulated by Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012).

Theorist Natalie Loveless (2019) explains research-creation as a process of undisciplining knowledge while pushing against existing academic structures. The siloed approach to disciplines creates rigid boundaries between fields of knowledge that often feel difficult to traverse. French philosopher Michel Foucault (1975) points to how the disciplinary structure of learning evolved in tandem with modern forms of control, such as the prison system. He explains that disciplines create the illusion of mastery that then reinforce hierarchies of position and power among individuals (Foucault, 1975). These structures contribute to the illusion of

¹¹ See footnote 3.

¹² See footnote 4.

universal and normative understandings of the world, while also invalidating perspectives or approaches that deviate from hegemonic research and knowledge construction. I find it interesting that the term discipline has multiple definitions. Two in particular are related but clearly distinct. We use this word to speak of fields of study and etymologically the term “comes from *discipulus*, the Latin word for *pupil*” (Merriam-Webster, n. d.). The term discipline was used in association to punishment starting in the 13th century (Foucault, 1975; Merriam-Webster, n. d.). These dual definitions are not antithetical and in fact help us better understand the imbricated nature of knowledge and power and the history of schooling in this country.

Loveless (2019) reminds us that we require alternate approaches to research that depart from the existing options, most of which serve to reinforce disciplinary differentiation. Research, if approached expansively, can serve to help restructure systems of knowledge. The goal of any investigation is inquiry, identifying an area of interest or curiosity and further exploring that thread. We engage in multiple forms of inquiry before we even have the capacity to recollect this process; however, systems of socialization and education stifle our curiosity. Both impose the assumption that there are proper and illegitimate ways to engage research. This should not be conflated with applying ethical considerations to our research process but, instead, lead us to question why certain forms of knowledge construction are privileged over others, specifically within institutions of learning. Loveless notes that the deployment of research-creation is not about accessing institutional validation. That would place this method in a precarious position wherein the values and goals of research-creation run the risk of being tempered and diluted. Instead, research-creation, “is for the insertion of voices and practices that trouble the relay of knowledge/power that figure the disciplines impacted by any given research-creation practice” (Loveless, 2020, p. 28). Research-creation resists being made palatable to existing Western

epistemological traditions, and instead moves researchers to continue to find new openings for how to engage in research that disrupts and decentralizes systems of knowledge and power. I think that the deployment of this methodology can help us push against existing institutional ways of knowing and research parameters. Additionally, our participation as a collective in this research project helps to disrupt knowledge construction as a singular or one directional process.

Loveless (2019) explains that her articulation of research-creation evolved from other practice-based approaches to inquiry such as artistic research, arts-based research, and creative praxis. These forms of inquiry circulate within and across various disciplines. Yet, the existing practice-based methods are situated in equally restrictive understandings of the arts. Artist and theorist Luis Camnitzer has dedicated his career to reconfiguring the current understanding of the role, process, and purpose of art and artistic production. Camnitzer (2020) states, “It is likely that, soon after the first work of art was completed, it was recognized that art as a methodology might potentially contradict the interests of those in power... Art might be subversive, and therefore needs to be domesticated,” (p. 14). From this vantage point, it is easy to assume that the transformative power of artistic production has served as a possible motivation for those who wish to promote cultural hegemony to sterilize and standardize art. The framing of art education and artistic production as discrete disciplines divorced from other approaches to knowledge and research extract art from an interdisciplinary context. As a collective we know otherwise. We understand that artistic production is an interdisciplinary endeavor and can be an instrument of social change. This is one of the foundational principles of our collective. We understand the interdisciplinary nature of artistic production. Our own previous projects and collaborations straddle various topics and areas of study, yet they all work to challenge systems of power and oppression.

Loveless (2019) offers research-creation as a way to deviate from current approaches to inquiry that have accepted art as research under restrictive terms. This distance is motivated by a desire to reconfigure our focus and points of intervention. Loveless warns that:

In very many ways, giving “art” the status of “research” does little more than echo early feminist interventions into the cannon that took the form of “add women and stir” — a tokenistic gesture of inclusion that does nothing to change the logic that structure these expulsions in the first place. (p. 6)

Rather than continue to reinscribe possibly reductive approaches to research that include or centers artistic forms, Loveless frames research-creation as a polyamorous interdisciplinary approach to inquiry that extends beyond the current subjugated definitions of art under disciplinary categorization. Instead, we are invited to approach research and institutions of learning as a sort of artistic material (Loveless, 2019). This reorientation is echoed by Jorge Lucero’s (2019) proposal to test the pliability of all things in a spirit of attentive play and curiosity. Both Loveless (2019) and Lucero (2019) remind us that we do not need to be beholden to institutionally sanctioned forms of research. This framework may aid in decentering systems of knowledge, while also helping to slowly, yet intentionally, erode oppressive systems of all kinds while holding the possibility to simultaneously build non-oppressive alternatives to research. I find the political orientations of research-creation to be well aligned with the work of the Chicago ACT Collective as well as my own research goals.

Loveless (2019) clarifies that research-creation can be utilized in combination with other practice-based methods and methodologies. To frame research-creation in opposition to or challenging other practice-based approaches to research would be to misunderstand the interdisciplinary possibilities of this methodology. However, I hesitate to claim another practice-

based methodology at this point in the research process. I trust that the organic and emergent nature of research-creation will allow us to generate work that is reflective of who we are as a group rather than framed from a singular pre-determined perspective.

Thank you, again, for agreeing to embark on this process with me. I am excited for what we will generate together.

Con cariño,

Pau

A Letter About Erotic Attunement, Part One

Friends,

In reorienting conventional approaches to research, it is possible to find more expansive openings; for example, inquiry, can be understood as a form of erotic study. Black feminist poet foremother Audre Lorde (1984) and musician and theorist Sam Rocha (2012) engage the erotic as a powerful force through which we can understand learning in general, and our collaborative project in particular.

Lorde (1984) reminds us that the erotic is a “personification of love in all its aspects” (p. 107). She reminds us that the degradation of the erotic as a reductive manifestation of the pornographic is connected to patriarchal and colonial structures that attempt to divorce emotions and other senses from systems of knowledge (Lorde, 1984). The Cartesian Split, sanctioned by hegemonic educational structures, privileges the mind over the body and works to invalidate feeling and affect as rigorous forms of study. However, Lorde insists that the erotic as a practice of love and attunement to the generative possibilities of feeling and affect can be powerful and transformational. We are asked to sit with all of our emotions—the good as well as the bad—and, in naming our feelings, we are able to trace the source of our desire. Lorde warns that to deny ourselves the experience of a full range of feeling is to participate in our own invalidation and subjugation. However, if we embrace the erotic as an integral aspect of who we are and how we come to be, “Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within” (Lorde, 1984, p. 111).

I see evidence of this in our group, although perhaps we have not explicitly named it through Lorde’s (1984) terms. As a collective, I believe that we are each motivated by desire and love. These feelings are often articulated as love for people, communities, and the planet, and a

desire to transform unjust structures. These feelings can offer a place from which to begin our collaborative investigation.

Rocha (2012) argues for more expansive understanding of study rooted in the erotic as an opening through which to rewrite conventional understandings of how educational institutions generally approach and frame forms of study. Rocha utilizes a phenomenology of study to illustrate the holistic, experiential, and embodied form erotic study assumes. We have been led to believe that study is something that can be measured and instantaneously engaged, like flipping a light switch, yet this is not always the case. However, even though our impulse may fluctuate, desire for study persists and can be engaged in multiple forms not always easily detected or recognized as such (Rocha, 2012).

Memory and repetition help enable attunement to study that can be calibrated through deep and rigorous love of learning and inquiry. Rocha clarifies that memory should not be conflated with the rote memorization we are accustomed to in conventional schooling. Instead, he frames memorization as a deeper form of knowing and understanding where the material of study is folded back into ourselves and resonates beyond simple recollection. We arrive at this process through repetition, or practice. We are reminded that rehearsal and performance both engage memory and repetition and enact a cyclical loop of learning by complicating our presumed understanding through an iterative process. I imagine this to look like a sort of spiral that extends vertically, resembling an expanding spring. This dynamic is reciprocal and relational, study is continuous and open to revision.

The distinction between memory and memorization made me think about how even though I used to cram for statistics exams in high school, I never fully understood the concepts and mechanics of the subject. I learned the material for a series of tests and then the information

evaporated from my consciousness. I never fully absorbed the content. Braiding hair, however, is an entirely different story. I don't have a specific memory of learning to braid. But I did have to practice, a lot, in order to achieve more elaborate hairstyles outside of the three-strand braid. I would watch my neighbors braid and then practice by styling my younger sister's hair. Once I understood the mechanics of various styles such as the French braid, crown braid, and mermaid braid, I would practice on myself. I would stand in front of a three-sided mirror in the bathroom attempting to braid my hair until my arms felt like limp noodles. Eventually, the parting, twisting, and twirling of my hair became muscle memory. After many years of practice, I can braid my hair in different styles without the assistance of a mirror. I can use my understanding, memories, and dexterity to create different kinds of braided hairstyles, often combining different techniques. I was able to achieve this through repetition and intentional use of memory. Braiding also became a vehicle through which I learned to question Eurocentric beauty standards at an early age. My fascination with braided hairstyles prompted me to question why I did not see such styling reflected in popular media. My initial interest became a conduit for further inquiry. This is one of many examples of how I learned to follow my curiosities and adopted study as a lifelong practice.

Rocha (2012) notes how musicians spend countless hours rehearsing, working with their instrument and craft beyond taking lessons. He explains that there is a relational dynamic that ensues when music is made or performed (Rocha, 2012). This interaction takes place beyond the exchange between a musician, their instrument, and the context of the performance or rehearsal. Beyond environmental factors Rocha (2012) includes the extrasensorial components that are not often easily detected such as "the muse, the ghosts of memories and desires" (p. 68). These factors are especially present for improvisational jazz musicians who do not rely on mimicking a

previous rehearsal. Rocha explains that improvisational jazz performers must be fully present, in tune with, and respond to the various components that inform the music they create.

Improvisation is a difficult task as it requires a deep presence and attunement. Historically the rigor required to perform improvisation has been minimized as instinct and feeling, which help steer this process, are rendered inferior to solely intellectual practices (Goldman, 2010). Lorde (1984), Rocha (2012), and Goldman (2010) know otherwise and serve as reminders of the power and potential that can be harnessed through improvisation and the erotic manifested through relational dynamics and affect. Dancer and theorist Danielle Goldman (2012) points to the ways in which improvisation and rehearsal can also serve as a vehicle to imagine and conceive of new modalities of freedom. Our rehearsals within our collective allow us to become comfortable with improvisation and enacting our individual and collective vision for transformative justice work in the world and across various communities. Goldman reminds us that freedom is a journey and not a destination, as our conceptualizations of freedom are likely to change over time given different contexts. However, erotic attunement can enable a sustained devotion toward study that allows us to persistently manifest our visions in the world outside of our collective.

Like Foucault (1975), Rocha (2012) resists the conventional notion of mastery. However, Rocha frames his rejection of mastery differently. Mastery may be realized through love or, “a thick, warm, erotic, and endless form of study,” (Rocha, 2012, p. 68). Mastery conceived of as possession or superiority is nullified through rehearsal and performance as this process asks us to re-engage with study unceasingly, and perhaps can be better understood as a sort of devotion to study (Rocha, 2012). Rocha reiterates that erotic study does not occur by chance and is adamant that erotic study is performed and cannot be absolved from inaction. So, even though we might

not intentionally engage in erotic study at all times, erotic study teaches us to orient our attention to how we enact and sustain our interests and curiosities.

Rocha (2012) also reminds us of the vulnerability that surfaces from erotic study. He notes that much is revealed about the person who engages and performs deep and sustained study. There is a sort of freedom but also a sense of exposure in this process. While erotic study allows ample room through which to evolve and embrace change, even make mistakes, the public nature of performance leaves a trace. Although, Boris Groys (2018) notes that given the oversaturation of material and information available in the world, the vast majority of work gets drowned out and made near invisible within a context of a wide public outside of our designated audience. It is made clear that the ego must be suspended or slowly eroded, as we are reminded of the dangers of centering humanist individuality which pulls us away from relational dynamics and a deep study. The ego can get in the way of the iterative nature of rehearsal and continued study.

Erotic study allows for emergent and iterative research, because the joyful desire for study enables a cyclical and durational process of inquiry, memorization, repetition, and performance. Erotic study, as proposed by Lorde (1984) and Rocha (2012) offer openings for expansive research that is rooted in deep love, joy, curiosity, and play.

As a collective we are already immersed in erotic study in various forms both as individuals and as a group. Study is what we do together (Moten & Harney, 2013). These ideas and theories are lived. We experience them through camping trips, revealed in full-belly laughter around a bonfire, in shared meals, in difficult conversations, in vulnerable exchanges and proclamations of love and care, in the shared making of things and worlds, in laughter, watching soccer games and movies, in the quiet moments, political analysis, the never-ending text thread,

and weekly video calls. These are examples of ordinary things, but these moments of quotidian life are the driving force of erotic study that orients us to embrace life and the world as material in action.

Con cariño,

Pau

A Letter About Erotic Attunement, Part Two

Querida familia,

We have come together as a group around a shared love of study manifested in various forms and as a result have cultivated a deep love for one another along the process. It is this emotion, felt and manifested differently by each of us, that also helps extend this work beyond the incubator of our collective. Love is both a source and consequence of erotic study, or one possible manifestation of research-creation.

Loveless (2019), working through Donna Haraway's (2003) teachings, states "If agape figures a *knowing in general*—so-called unconditional love—eros figures something that is conditional (in the sense of being *situated*) and that is both critically unknown and unknowable (in the sense of being *emergent*)" (p. 27). Love, understood as *eros*, is always in a process of becoming, never fully fixed or satisfied. The impermanence of love as *eros*, or erotic love, offers infinite possibilities for learning and understanding because of its enigmatic nature. Our desire for inquiry, informed by our positionality, propels us into iterative cycles of loving research.

Eros is the love that James Baldwin (1962), our activist and theorist forefather, addresses in *The Fire Next Time*. In this text Baldwin reflects on the conditions of racial injustice on the eve of the centennial signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. The material conditions of structural racism are felt and manifested through Baldwin's text, which consists of a letter to his nephew and a reflection of his life and experience growing up in Harlem, New York. Baldwin reminds us that love is a driving force and can be an agent for transformational change. In spite of the difficulty and dangers that are ever present for a queer Black man, Baldwin insists that we must resist hatred and desensitized emotion. Baldwin (1962) famously states:

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word “love” here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being or a state of grace - not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring growth. (p. 95)

During the six years that I worked as a high school art teacher this quote hung next to my desk. I looked at it every morning as I prepared for my day. It served as a reminder to tap into the possibilities that love, stemming from eros, can enact. Baldwin’s words helped orient my purpose and ground me in my pedagogical philosophy, which was learned and modeled through various community spaces. I was, and continue to be, driven by love. The type of love described by Baldwin helps release us from the individualistic ego and helps to point us to think collectively. Through love, our attention is oriented toward structural and systemic issues of power that extend beyond our own individual experience and help us create wider openings for critical analysis. Baldwin reminds us that love is not always manifested through feelings of happiness, that expressions of love can be challenging and ask us to stretch ourselves and our thinking. Love continues to inspire me to return to the difficult labor of erotic study and a desire for deep understanding but also transformation.

Grounding our work through an orientation rooted in love might present doubt or skepticism from those not already attuned to love’s generative possibilities. Love, especially if it is not understood expansively, beyond a romantic love or a singular manifestation rooted in pleasantries, can seem idealistic or impractical. However, through the work of theorist and Chicana Studies scholar Chela Sandoval (2000), we are able to harness the potential of love as a hermeneutic, the process of arriving at meaning, in order to attain what she calls a *differential consciousness*. Through the work of Roland Barthes (1977) and Jacques Derrida (1973),

Sandoval (2000) explains how love as a hermeneutic, or an interpretive device, can serve as a catalyst for continual study, transformation, and understanding. *Differential consciousness* is a mode of perception rooted in extrasensorial affect or emotive understanding. Sandoval notes that *differential consciousness* is made available through experiences such as love that disrupt systems of signification and challenge ideological constructions but cannot be expressed through words alone.

Feelings, emotions, sensations, and the body are again framed as defensible forms of knowing and understanding. Sandoval explains that this hermeneutic resists being anchored to any fixed ideology especially those ideals that impose binary frameworks. Instead, it encourages a perpetual untethered *madness*. While there are scholars working to trouble ableist language around a wide spectrum of neurodiversity issues (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Bailey & Mobley, 2019) this notion of *madness* is explained here as a way of being that resists normativity. Sandoval's articulation of madness parallels mad studies' reclamation of a term previously understood through restrictive negative connotations and challenges hegemonic understandings of neurotypical perceptions.

Sandoval (2000) works through Barthes (1977) to demonstrate how love can prompt us to consider the world outside of the limited scope of language. We are invited to examine the senses and other ways of knowing that cannot be solely articulated through language alone, but are present and felt. Discomfort is presented as a necessary sensation if we are to achieve a *differential consciousness* (Sandoval, 2000). Sandoval (2000) explains that pain and difficulty can help free us from binding ties, but only after we have fully broken down and reached a point of "zero degree" (p. 140).

I don't believe that Sandoval is insinuating that suffering is the only, singular, route through which we can arrive at *differential consciousness*. But this sensation, which we are taught to fear or avoid, can also teach us a lot, not only about ourselves but about the world as well. I initially struggled with this proposition. However, I understand that discomfort, prompted by love, can help us break down systems and beliefs we previously held. Sandoval (2000) explains that bliss or *jouissance* is "coming to a utopian nonsite, a no-place where everything is possible—but only in exchange for the pain of the crossing" (p. 140). If we can embrace discomfort, we are less likely to bury our heads in the sand or avert our gaze from the various injustices that plague our society. We are reminded that we must engage with these systems and with life in all of its complications and possible contradictions. Erotic attunement can help to sustain this process even through the most difficult or uncomfortable of moments.

In loving and living there is joy that can sustain us but also push us to continue to notice differently and work toward other worlds where we are not defined by or beholden to oppressive systems. Love and difficulty can also teach us to be patient, we are asked to suspend judgement or harsh criticism of ourselves and others. Otherwise, we run the risk of enacting a similar violence that limits our capacity for growth and transformation because we reinscribe binaries through new but equally oppressive social norms. Sandoval (2000) turns to Derrida (1973) to analyze the ever-shifting terrain of meaning and signification as understood through the unnamable and ever ambiguous, always hidden, yet present ways of knowing and understanding best described as *differance*.

As *differance* surpasses space and time we can conceive of it as a juncture, one that holds the past, present, and future in multivalent tension (Sandoval, 2000). So that meaning is understood through various contexts and points of shifting relational intersections which are

never fully fixed and resist universal understandings or interpretations. Sandoval (2000) reminds us of the utopian possibility available through an understanding of *differance* and love as a hermeneutic.

Love is framed as continuous engagement with ideas, because language and concepts are ever shifting. We can work from temporary locations of incomplete meaning with the understanding that these are bound to change with the shifting terrain. While we may not always be able to anticipate these changes we can learn to pay attention to how we adapt our systems of meaning, naming, and communicating to allow for such modifications. Sandoval (2000) explains love as the constant return and attention to meaning.

While these concepts might be new to some of us in this articulated form, they are also familiar in other ways, learned through life and experience. Alarcon (1994) notes that while Western theorists have been working toward understanding and addressing politics of difference, many minoritized people and women of color feminist specifically, have been living and practicing and redefining these theories in action. For now, we can lean on Lorde (1984), Loveless (2019), Rocha (2012), Baldwin (1963), and Sandoval (2000) along with Barthes (1977) and Derrida (1973) to help find a temporary common language rooted in love as hermeneutic or erotic study as a way to move through our collaborative research-creation endeavor.

We each may have different motivators for our commitment to our work and our collective. However, the love we have for one another and our communities help fuel our work to dismantle oppressive structures with an eye toward alternative systems. Our love is palpable and generative. I know the love the collective radiates serves as a beacon for me when I undoubtedly feel overwhelmed or lost, your love helps reel me back to my own sense of love and desire. Our collective love is a powerful force that cannot be contained. I trust that we will

continue to find new channels through which to share the abundance of our love with others.

Thank you for sharing your love with me.

Con cariño,

Pau

A Letter About Crisis

Camarades,¹³

In the five years that we have intentionally collaborated as a group we have responded to a number of issues through artistic exploration and intervention. At times it has felt as though we are in a constant state of crisis and panic. Over the past two years, the Covid-19 global pandemic paired with other major social and political events have made the transition to a new decade feel particularly cataclysmic.

Janet Roitman (2013) explains that the term crisis indicates a moment of decision or judgement based on comparisons. The differentiation that is prompted by moments of crisis marks time clearly, indicating a past and present relative to the dilemma. It often prevents us from conceiving of a future given our focused attention to the issue in the current moment. Roitman notes that the urgency that is created around crisis also shapes how we engage with the situation. We learn to understand moments of crisis as singular or individual events, often removed from broader historical context (Roitman, 2013). A different function of crisis also serves to help shape and inform historical narratives (Roitman, 2013). However, for many, crisis is constant and ordinary. This is not meant to minimize or invalidate the surge of feelings that come with what may feel like catastrophic moments or situations, but rather as a reminder, prompted by Roitman, to be attentive to the types of narratives that are shaped and informed by the notion of crisis.

It feels as though we are living in an especially difficult time, we can point to a number of pressing issues that feel equally urgent. The gravity of each topic often leaves us feeling

¹³ See footnote 10.

exhausted and anxious, stretched in multiple directions. This exasperates the persistence of crisis. Yet, as a society we tend to have a short attention span and a hazy memory. News cycles keep viewers focused on individual trending topics instead of looking at how issues are interrelated and created by the same system of power and oppression.

We have lived through two years of an ongoing global pandemic. Our time in forced social isolation may have compounded our sense of anxiety and sensitivity to a number of issues. The pandemic pointed to the lack of equitable access to healthcare, housing, and employment. Our neighborhoods are plagued by violence that has been systemically created. Our recent presidential election magnified the undeniable and violent rise of fascism. As a society we are still unable to critically discuss, let alone impact, racism and structural racism widely. The oppressive structures that dictate the lives, opportunities, and material conditions of many of are clearly hidden in plain sight. Yet there is shame and stigma associated with discussing and addressing the violent history of enslavement which reverberates and palpitates in the present moment. As residents of the northern hemisphere in the American continent we inhabit stolen land. While some lean on land acknowledgements to honor the ancestral stewards of the land we have yet to find sustainable ways to address and repair the violence that was enacted not only on the land but to the stewards of this land who were forcibly removed from their homes and have faced centuries of systemic genocide. We are rapidly depleting our natural resources and causing irreparable harm to the planet. Even though the land will likely heal over time, we will destroy ourselves, or create the conditions that do not enable our survival. Our society has created a dependence on technology and the racially biased algorithms we have generated for our capitalist driven productivity are shaping our society (Lanier, 2018) and impacting our psychology, yet we are farther removed from systems of knowledge and information because of our limited approach

to how knowledge is constructed and disseminated. The knowledge produced in universities is years behind the theories and practices on the ground and in the street. Individualism is a byproduct of capitalism and given the social, political, economic conditions, we are in a situation where it is becoming more difficult to ignore stark divides at all levels.

We are being forced to deal with a lot of issues all at once including continued police brutality, racial injustice, gender, sexuality, ableism, nationalism, educational inequities, and issues around economic justice to name a few. In spite of these challenges when most attempt to find solutions they generally tend to protect capitalism and systems of white supremacy rooted in individualism. As a society we have a lot of work to do to unlearn and critically address a slew of issues that promote a sense of crisis. I see the ACT Collective navigating what for others feels like impossible discussions with immense generosity, patience, and care. These issues are not new to us, yet we continue to approach this labor through a critical and self-reflective lens. As a collective we have built something special, and we extend this work beyond what might from the outside appear as an exclusive or singular structure. We aren't significantly swayed by the lure of crisis because we have learned to lean on each other and our varied strengths to collectively address various issues. Together we are able to offer numerous entry points and perspectives to the issues listed above. Our thinking may not always align but we help extend each other's thinking and model criticality in our analysis as well as self-reflection. We are able to point to the systems that have created these issues while maintaining an awareness of how such structures can divide and distract communities.

We see crisis as an opportunity for action and artistic intervention. We first modeled this generative reframing of difficulty immediately after the 2016 Presidential Election. Together, the ACT Collective generated and distributed sanctuary posters meant to counter the hateful rhetoric

that was central to Donald Trump's campaign. While our initial design addressed a variety of intersectional issues, the limited space prevented us from including all anti-oppressive movements. The poster design was adapted to offer a blank template for others to generate their own ideas of sanctuary. In keeping with our goals to make our artistic materials publicly available, the posters were made available on our website as free pdf files (Chicago ACT Collective, n.d.). This enabled people who did not reside in our area to print and display our designs in their own communities. This is one example of many similar artistic interventions we have enacted in response to moments of crisis. Our work reminds me of the generative possibilities that can be leveraged when we focus our attention on action through creating artwork and contributing to building alternatives to oppressive structures.

Having an awareness of how crisis is created and operates does not absolve us of the anxiety and possible fear that are common responses in moments of distress. However, I feel better knowing that we can lean on each other during moments of hardship. There is comfort in the reassurance that we have each other's backs and that together we will channel our possible apprehension into material to continue envisioning and shaping new worlds.

Con cariño,

Pau

Figure 8.

Chicago ACT Collective Sanctuary Poster

SANCTUARY FOR OUR PEOPLE

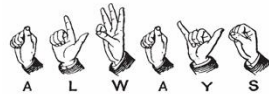
Your
Black
Lives
Matter

Immigrants,
we have no walls

Women, your bodies
are your own

Queer/Non-conforming/Trans
people, you are seen and loved

Individuals with
disabilities,
you make us stronger



Muslims,
you are
honored here

Young people,
your voice is
powerful

YOU ARE SAFE HERE YOU BELONG

Chicago ACT Collective

Note. Image courtesy of Paulina Camacho Valencia.

Figure 9.

Chicago ACT Collective Sanctuary Poster (Spanish)



Note. Image courtesy of Paulina Camacho Valencia.

A Letter About the Research Process

Amigues,¹⁴

My previous letters have helped to carve out some of the ideas that are informing this collective research process. I have yet to fully articulate how I anticipate the unfolding of this work. I hesitate to make any definitive claim to the methods we will utilize, as I am fully committed to a collaborative process. While I might have a few ideas, I would prefer to arrive at a decision as a group. This does not mean that I do not have a plan for how to guide this shared inquiry process. Over the past five years we have learned to engage different processes for collaboration. Each project we have worked on necessitates different orientations and frameworks as the goals and outcomes vary. Our previous work has modeled a variety of strategies we can implement for this project. As an example, in the past we have used shared documents to co-write proposals and statements. Some of us may take the lead and others offer input and feedback. There is no pressure to contribute if we currently lack the time or energy to participate or if we need to step back at some point during the process. We may choose to carry these practices into this project. I also lean on the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and adrienne maree brown (2017, 2020). Specifically, I will continue to reference Smith's (2012) "Twenty-five Indigenous Projects" and brown's (2017) "Tools for Emergent Strategy Facilitation" as well as *We Will Not Cancel Us* (brown, 2020). Smith (2012) offers examples of decolonial research projects while brown (2017) presents principles, protocols, and concrete questions to help steer our work. We have referenced these sources in the past and even if some of us may not have had an opportunity to read these citations, we can lean on one another to help paraphrase the material.

¹⁴ See footnote 4.

Given that this work is an extension of my doctoral studies, I am already positioned slightly differently within this inquiry process. Education researchers Rossman & Rallis (2003) explain two key terms used by anthropologists to better understand the position of a researcher relative to their collaborators; the term *etic* refers to an outsider while the label *emic* is used to describe an insider position. As a member of the collective, I am an insider and member of our community. However, as the person responsible for leading and compiling this project within an institutional setting, according to Rossman & Rallis, I am also an outsider. However, I find these polarizing positions reductive. We hold a variety of intersectional identities and positions (Anzaldúa, 2015; Taylor, 2017; Crenshaw, 2011) and two binary stances do not prevent potential shortsightedness on the part of the researcher. I understand that an awareness of the researcher's subject position is intended to help structure ethical interactions. However, I find that decolonial feminist Indigenous researchers such as TallBear (2014) have articulated more comprehensive models through which to consider ethical interactions amongst researchers and collaborators that point toward colonial frameworks embedded in research. In a previous letter on decolonial research, I shared how TallBear encourages researchers to approach inquiry as a relational endeavor that is accomplished with and alongside collaborators. I hope that we can hold one another to our research agreements and notify the group if we ever feel we are steering far off course. This is not meant to place additional labor on any one person or deter curious wanderings, but instead to remind us that if we are all attentive to the process, I trust that we will hold one another to ethical research practices that honor the voices and contributions of every participant.

If possible, I would like to suggest that we aim to limit the research process to this summer. This timeline should help serve as an *enabling constraint* (Manning & Massumi, 2014),

or generative boundary that helps demarcate the conditions of our work together. Given the abundance of material we can pull from as research “data” I anticipate that one potential challenge may lie in attempting to determine what we include and what is omitted for this project. In a series of propositions for collaborative interactions Manning & Massumi (2014) articulate a distinction between conditions and framing. They note that conditions offer openings for emergent processes whereas framings structure anticipated or formulaic predetermined organization (Manning & Massumi, 2014). This differentiation is not intended to imply partiality, rather to help provide additional clarity for our process. Through this series of letters, I have laid out a few frameworks that will shape our work. The conditions have also been alluded to, yet the specificities of our orientations are yet to be determined as these will be decided as a group. The collective will mold the particular parameters of our research during our planning meeting. This will also include concretizing our research questions and goals, decisions about what counts as data, as well as a specific timeline, and determining how everyone would like to be involved in the process. We will not have a lot of time to implement this work, however, I have learned from previous experience that we work well under limited time constraints. Of course, if needed, the proposed schedule can be adapted.

The invitation to participate can also be rejected, suspended, or deferred and will still yield an abundance of content for discussion and collective analysis. Tuck & Yang (2014a) remind us that refusal, especially within a research context, can be a generative form. There are many reasons why we might resist or refuse participation or sharing of certain information such as the withholding of “knowledge that the academy doesn’t deserve” (Tuck & Yang, 2014a, p. 224). Tuck & Yang remind us that refusal can function as means through which we can establish boundaries and limit the potential further colonization of knowledge. Beyond a withholding,

“refusal in research makes way for other r-words—for resistance, reclaiming, recovery, reciprocity, repatriation, regeneration” (Tuck & Yang, 2014a, p. 244). We will have an opportunity to decide, together, what we include and what we refuse to include as material for research.

I would like to schedule a preliminary collaborative meeting where we generate agreements and address any questions or concerns that might surface. We can agree on how many follow up group gatherings might be required before we join for a concluding meeting. I would also like to schedule conversations with each participating member or smaller groups. These conversations are not intended as interviews, they are meant to address any questions and talk through ideas. These brief discussions will help me plan for the final written documentation of our collective research.

I hope that the invitation to participate in this research project will not impose excessive additional tasks or labor to our already busy lives. Instead, I would like to invite us to think about the things we already do and engage with as part of this process. We can collectively generate a list of activities and documentation practices that we already utilize. An example of this might include our weekly Zoom gatherings, our text message thread, exchange of memes, phone calls, and other practices. We can lean on available technology such as screen capture tools, applications such as Dispo for collective photographic documentation, collaborative Spotify playlists, and other similar resources.

The content we generate will inevitably be flawed in that it will fail to capture the intricacies and contexts of our being and being with one another and with the world. We will capture brief moments in a much more complicated and layered process. Our task is to find ways to document and share what emerges from our collective structure. Together we will decide how

to convey the stuff of our everyday relationships in whichever form we feel best reflects these interactions and experiences.

I found Lucero (2018) especially helpful in reminding me that quotidian experiences can serve not only as material for making but can be framed as the work itself. Conventional forms of making and engaging in research can be disrupted and provoked as an initial step toward expanding our own definitions and testing the pliability (Lucero, 2019) of our imaginative potential.

I will be tasked with compiling our collective contributions in one written document to fulfill the requirements of my doctoral course of study. I will be positioned as a sort of translator or facilitator of our collective self-investigation and the possible transference of this material to pedagogical settings. In keeping with the feminist decolonial theories that help frame our research project, I would love input on the formation of the final written document. I will, of course, also share the final paper with all of you. Should it feel appropriate, the material we generate might also assume another life form in a different context outside of this investigation.

It is my hope that we can establish a feedback loop on my compilation of material, but given our limited time and our numerous responsibilities, this might not be entirely possible. To avoid adding additional tasks I would also like to, as much as possible, create the space for each of you to represent your own ideas in whatever form you feel best capture your thoughts. This will help to minimize the inevitable mistranslations that might occur through this process. However, if we begin from an understanding and embrace the imprecision of this general process, we might be able to use the vagueness of language and research as material to play with.

You have taught me time and again that research can be fun and engaging as well as informative with the potential to help transform. We have modeled that research is not confined

to institutional frameworks. I am excited to collaborate with you all and explore what is possible given the conditions of this project. I know I have said it before, but I will say it again. Thank you, so much, for agreeing to participate in this endeavor. I deeply value each and every one of you and your contributions to my life, and now this work. I am excited for what comes next.

Con cariño,

Pau

A Letter About Our Collective Power

Amigues¹⁵ del alma,

We need one another. You all help to remind me that our survival depends on our ability to learn to be in community in ways that push and extend our understanding and teach us to sit with all kinds of feelings and emotions. We have learned to pool our resources for collective action. This work is not just about pleasure and care, although we can lean on moments of joy to help sustain us and propel our efforts. This work is also about action and change. Both are not disparate as I have learned that there is an abundance of bliss in intentional action. As a collective, we have created a space where we can practice and work together to imagine, shape, and build what we want for ourselves and others. We are then better prepared to move from our inner circle out to the world.

This work is magnified through collaboration with other groups and collectives to mutually support each other. Through this process we have become less dependent on the systems that we actively work to challenge. We gain a deeper understanding of the strategies and tactics needed to eradicate these structures. We do this work in the hopes that we can someday fully sustain ourselves and our broader communities. And even though at times it feels as though these are colossal or impractical endeavors, that carry major responsibility, we continue to model this work through our actions while pointing to our own flaws.

We have spent a full year practicing social isolation and removed from one another physically, yet we have grown stronger. We have utilized the resources available to us to connect on a weekly basis rather than on a monthly basis. The unexpected circumstances of the pandemic

¹⁵ See footnote 4.

also allowed us to be inclusive of those of us who have left our home base, our city. We have demonstrated that we are adaptable and have refused to be shaken to a point of apathy.

Many of us were fully ready to engage transformative justice work because it has been modeled for us by previous generations. We have historically leaned on communities and collectives as systems of support and survival. This is how people used to live before capitalism and oppressive power structures. Many people still live this way.

The skills and ways of being we are collectively developing and practicing are important. I hope that this collaborative research platform can function as another vehicle through which we can articulate the practices and goals of our collective and publicly share our brilliance with the world.

I hope this round of letters have been able to convey my commitment to the collective and to this work, articulating the ideas that are guiding how I am thinking about this project. I think that we have created something special and magical, but also ordinary, yet so uncommon. I believe this work is important and has relevance in multiple spaces. We have already been deeply entrenched in research, the only thing that is changing is the public documentation of a fraction of our complex structure. I hope this process can help us share our work through a platform beyond our website and hyperlocal collaborations.

We cannot offer a step-by-step guide to being in relational community, but we can share our experiences as an example for how this work moves through our collective and extends beyond the immediate construct and radiates outward not only to the surrounding area but the world. My hope is that other artists and educators find this work approachable and adaptable to their own context and community settings. Research should not be defined by the assumption that knowledge and lines of investigation are only valuable if they have concrete applicability

within existing structures. This work is about compiling one approach to dismantling oppressive power. To frame our work as directly replicable in different contexts would be to reinforce the very structure we are working away from.

I see our contributions to the world as a modeling of generative building and sharing of strategies, tactics, and resources that have been beneficial to our formation. How can we begin to teach or offer openings through which we can share these values, or make space for being with to enable new relationships to form? What is the materiality of a collective? What are our values and how can they be translated for others to apply in their own spaces, lives, communities?

Loveless (2019) states:

Research creation, at its best, has a capacity to impact our social and material conditions, not by offering more facts, differently figured, but by finding ways, through aesthetic encounters and events, to persuade us to care and to care *differently*. By wedging open what gets to count as research, where, when, and how, research-creation... works to render each of us a little more *capable*, a little more care-filled, opening us onto new webs of sensorial attunement and nurturance. (p. 107)

I see research-creation as an inclusive methodology that parallels much of what we already do as a collective. I hope our time as a collective can offer examples that might serve as incentives for others to find ways to form their own intentional communities or apply collective values to existing groupings. This dissertation project is not about leaving a permanent trace of our particular collective, but to inspire others to see the potential in this type of work so that we have an extensive saturation of collectives all working to dismantle and decenter oppressive systems of power.

I care about us, we care about each other and this work, and I hope that this form of caring through research can guide us to tap into ourselves, our resources, and our local communities as already fully equipped springs of knowledge and resources. We have to be able to harness our capacity for radical imagination and speculative world making and we need spaces predicated on trust among members of communities through which these skills can be practiced and allowed to flourish. I am forever indebted and full of gratitude for the generous gifts we have bestowed upon one another and the space we have created. Let's share this magic with others.

Con mucho cariño y en solidaridad,

Pau

CHAPTER 3: A SERIES OF LETTERS ABOUT RELEVANT LITERATURE INFORMING THE STUDY

A Letter About a Desire to Center Collective Structures as a Research Topic

Querides¹⁶ corazones,

I wanted to share something I wrote with you all. Enclosed you will find a paper I wrote for a Latina/Latino Studies seminar last semester. This particular assignment helped me solidify my dissertation proposal idea and desire to collaborate with you on this project. Even though this paper doesn't address our collective in particular, or collective structures in general, it helped me think through some of the ideas that have driven me to center our work for this project. Through this assignment I found myself coming around full circle to one of the primary motivators for my return to graduate school. The Froebel curriculum I co-taught with Nicole¹⁷ helped refueled my desire to disrupt existing art education narratives shaped by colonial systems of education, aesthetics, and politics. The development and implementation of this curriculum serves as one example of the multiple intersecting interventions we have made and continue to strive for in the world. I want to share how I am thinking about this work and the ideas that are currently informing my writing.

Hasta la próxima,

Pau

¹⁶ See footnote 3.

¹⁷ See footnote 7.

**Moving Toward a Critical Understanding of Race and Cultural Production in Art
Education**

Paulina Camacho Valencia
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LLS 577 Final Paper

On June 5, 1973, the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper published an article with the headline “8 cops hurt in school battle: 9 are seized in takeover” (Herman & Wattley, 1973). The piece briefly describes the injuries the police officers sustained while responding to a school protest. The article notes that one police officer “was struck in the face by a flying object” (Herman & Wattley, 1973, p. 15, col. 1). The image of this police officer being carried by two colleagues after having sustained an injury to the face was my introduction to the history of Froebel School previously located in the same near west side neighborhood I attended primary school, and a half mile away from the neighborhood high school I worked as a visual arts teacher. This article along with several images were introduced to me by Nicole Marroquin, associate professor in art education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This history was shared with her in an informal social gathering through storytelling. The narrators of the story provided a counter-story of the accounts described in the newspapers, they explained how the photograph of the injured police officer had been staged, and they further identified errors and missing information in various newspaper articles about the reported events (Marroquin, 2018a). This information inspired Nicole to research this seemingly forgotten Chicago local history. Nicole shared her findings with me, and we collaboratively generated curriculum that centered this history. I would like to share aspects of this project and make connections to critical race theory (CRT) as a disruption and possible extension of art education curriculum. By sharing the process of developing the Froebel curriculum and some of the challenges in implementing this lesson within a classroom space I hope to convey the importance of situating learning in the classroom and in non-institutional and intergenerational spaces. For this essay I will lean on critical race theory to help push art education discourse to better understand the aesthetic structures that impact ideological formations and in effect the politics and policies that shape the material

conditions of students' lived experience. In order to do this, I will share a brief overview of the historical importance of the Froebel School as it shaped my curricular practice, an introduction to the major tenets of CRT, then apply CRT to art education.

Froebel Elementary School was built in 1885 and functioned as an elementary school until 1962 when it became the ninth-grade center for near-by Harrison High School (Marroquin, 2018a). The Froebel Branch and Harrison High School served a predominantly Black and Latinx student body. In 1973 the Chicago Board of Education announced that the Froebel Branch was scheduled to be closed. A few months later, on June 5th, the students at Froebel staged a lock-in protest of the anticipated closure (Marroquin, 2018a). However, this was not the first time that Froebel students staged protests. As Marroquin (2018a) mentions, students at the Froebel Branch and Harrison High School began organizing city-wide walkouts starting in 1968 "in response to the deplorable school conditions, which included discrimination and bad teachers" (p. 53). The frequency of these demonstrations suggests a steadily growing sense of youth and community agency in Chicago.

In their edited volume *Chicana Movidas* Espinoza et. al (2018) note that many narratives of the movement years struggle to draw connections between various actions that took place throughout the country. Their book serves as an example of networked narratives that move beyond linear trajectories of the history of social movements and reveal various points of connection between different communities across the United States (Espinoza, 2018). The history of Midwest organizing during the movement era of the late 1960s and early 1970s has not been as well documented as its Texas and California counterparts. However, scholars such as Marroquin (2018a, 2018b), Espinoza et al. (2018), and Ramirez et al. (2011) are actively working on addressing this void in Chicana history and are helping to draw more visible

connections and points of influence and collaboration. While it is currently unknown to what extent Chicago youth were influenced by student organizing in Los Angeles, the timing of these, and other global events, suggests that these seemingly parallel histories must have multiple points of intersection. It is our task to continue to piece together these histories that serve as counter-narrative to dominant discourses that benefit from the erasure of historical resistance of people of color.

Nicole compiled images, articles, and academic scholarship about the schools' history as well as the youth and community members who organized and participated in the demonstrations. What Nicole's investigation revealed was that the history of Froebel School was directly tied to the history of the school where I worked at the time. As a young person, I learned the abbreviated history of the school where I taught through various neighborhood sources. Different people shared stories about how, during the 1970s, the community collectively organized and advocated for a high school in the neighborhood. Yet, in all of those stories Froebel was never mentioned. I asked my students at the time if they knew about the history of our school, and when only one student could vaguely speak to accounts that lead to our collectively existing in the same space, Nicole and I decided that we would collaborate and use her research project as a teaching and learning tool with my 9th and 11th grade visual arts students. We implemented this curriculum over the course of five years, adapting each iteration of the central focus of the lessons according to student interest.

My decision to invite Nicole to collaborate with me and my students was rooted in my pedagogical philosophy informed by the work of Paolo Freire (1968). I was introduced to critical pedagogy as an undergraduate student. This approach to teaching and learning reaffirmed my belief in the power and potential of education. For the better part of my life, I felt that schools

were spaces of oppression, and I struggled as a student and rejected the idea of becoming an educator. The imbalances of power and equity were apparent to me from a young age. I did not possess the language to articulate these observations, but I felt and experienced frustration caused by the lack of resources, the overcrowded classrooms, and the absence of my experience and culture in the curricular content. For example, in middle school I felt that I was lost in crowded classrooms, I could get by with doing the bare minimum even though I knew I could do better. Additionally, my entire high school curriculum, freshman through senior year, placed emphasis on European and Western epistemology. Any brief mention of Latin America was framed through the lens of colonialism and imperialism creating a very clear but hidden curriculum that reinforced a normative framing of Latin America as inferior relative to U. S. and Europe.

It was not until much later that I began to understand how my experience as a student of color in an urban public-school setting was informed by a violent history of racial injustice that began with the forced colonization of this country and the involuntary enslavement of African and Indigenous people (Wynter, 1995). I wanted to co-develop the Froebel curriculum because it touched on a number of the deeply complex and unjust aspects of public education that informed mine and my students' experience. The student population I worked with on the near west side of Chicago was predominantly Latinx, the majority of whom identified as Mexican American. In order to understand the complexities of racial structures that inform public education we must also address the formation of racial categories in and of themselves.

Many scholars of urban education have analyzed the disparities students of color face in educational settings (Delpit, 1995; Tatum, 1997; Tuck & Yang, 2014b). Some focus on specific racial and ethnic groups, working to understand various layers of inequities from different entry

points. Critical race theory (CRT) has begun to provide the conceptual framework and language through which to better understand issues of racial injustice as it relates not only to my lived experience but also my work as an educator. Critical race theory was developed in the 1970s within the legal field and expanded from Critical Legal Studies (Crenshaw, 2011). Crenshaw (2011) explains that early CRT scholars felt that issues of race within the legal field were not given the prominence and attention needed to deconstruct the racial biases rooted in the judicial system. Additionally, CRT's founding scholars felt that the class analysis of race utilized by critical legal studies was lacking in depth and holistic comprehension (Crenshaw, 2011). Instead, critical race theory challenges the biological assumptions of racial categorization and centers the analysis and discussion of race as it has been historically constructed and embedded in our society. More importantly, it also addresses how the laws that claim political neutrality have been utilized to construct systems of racial oppression that are hidden in plain sight (Crenshaw, 2011). Carbado (2011) explains that the legal system has been designed to center and favor whiteness and, in that vein, has effectively created a system of hierarchies that use whiteness as the normative and hegemonic social baseline. As such CRT scholars also critique and challenge assumptions of color-blindness and race neutrality and work to expose the dangers of such ideological frameworks that only serve to perpetuate the oppressive structures that sustain racial injustice (Crenshaw, 2011). At the root of these CRT frameworks is the belief that race is endemic to American society (Bell, 1992), and with our ever-expanding globalism and Western imperialism, it can be argued that race is a permanent global issue, even if it is negated internationally. Critical race theory works to make racial disparities visible but also proposes a number of strategies through which to push beyond potentially essentializing social justice

initiatives to work across multiple disciplines and enact incremental transformative racial justice.

Within the field of CRT there are debates about sub factions of the field that focus on specific racial and ethnic groups, such as Latinx CRT or Asian CRT. While these groups work to address specificities that inform each racial group, they also work to reinforce a Black and white racial binary in the way they reiterate this oppositional framing of racial narratives while attempting to better understand their footing within this paradigm. If we focus on the power afforded to whiteness and those who benefit from and aspire to a close proximity to whiteness, we might be able to address some of the more nuanced complexities that individual racial groups face. This is not to suggest an erasure or dismissal of the distinctions among different racial groups, but this framework, wherein we place emphasis on understanding the power afforded to whiteness, helps us address the larger overarching issues that have created existing racial hierarchies. In an effort to understand these structures, we need to place emphasis on the communities that are and have historically been most marginalized by systems of white supremacy such as Black and Indigenous communities.

This deliberation within CRT mirrors other debates around the use of blanket terms intended to serve as unifying descriptors but which run the risk of erasing important differences. Morales (2018) addresses the tension of terms within the Latinx community as he deconstructs Latinx political identities, their formation, and deployment within a broader global racial discourse and its material effects. Morales traces the Latinx history of racial identification beyond colonial discourse and draws connections to Spain's own racially tangled history prior to any traversal across the Atlantic Ocean. This framing complicates discussions of hybridity and *mestizaje* that are the more familiar approaches to the analysis and understanding Latinx racial

positionality (Morales, 2018). Morales pushes us to critically analyze the purpose and function of these terms, and notes that we lack the language to fully understand the complexities and layers of how different Latinx communities construct their racial identity. He goes on to note that the inefficiency of language flattens important differences between Latinx identified people, erases or obscures pertinent history, and sustains a Black and white binary that Latinx and other ethnic and racial groups struggle to define themselves within and against (Morales, 2018). While currently generalized terms might run the risk of obscuring nuanced differences, Morales notes that they also hold the power of unification if deployed in a manner that celebrates and centers distinctive characteristics and histories. Morales describes this process of holding many and often contradictory intersectional identities as a *multipositionality*. I believe that if we are able to combine this multifaceted and imperfect understanding of identity and racial categorization in combination with a CRT framework that works to deconstruct whiteness, we might be able to work in solidarity within a broad Latinx community and with other marginalized groups toward different configurations of social, political, and economic structures.

The major tenets of critical race theory (CRT) have been adopted by a number of fields of study as it is becoming clearer that siloed disciplines cannot fully address the complexities of the impact of socially constructed racial categories. Scholars of CRT have identified a set of essential tenets that guide the work of racial justice in education. In their article entitled “And We Are Still Not Saved: 20 Years of CRT in Education,” DeCuir and Dixon (2017), outline five main tenets of CRT. They are as follows: “(a) counter- storytelling (Matsuda), (b) the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992, 1995; Lawrence, 1995), (c) Whiteness as property (Harris, 1995), (d) interest convergence (Bell, 1980), and (e) the critique of liberalism (Crenshaw, 1988)” (p. 27). These conceptual frames have been applied to a number of disciplines. Gloria Ladson-

Billings and William F. Tate V are credited for introducing CRT tenets within the field of education (Carbado, 2011). Carbado (2011) explains Ladson-Billings's incentive for introducing a CRT framework in her own scholarship:

In Ladson-Billings's account, part of what traveled from CRT to Education were the ideas that race could, and should, function as the analytical core of one's scholarly engagements; that race was a product of racism, not a pre-existing identity to which racism subsequently attached; and that education scholars and activists could enlist the general tenets of CRT to stage theoretical, institutional, and policy interventions in the context of education. (p. 1621)

Building from this analysis of the role and importance of CRT in education I have begun to reframe and reflect on my teaching practice to understand the broader implications of my work and to shape my future pedagogical practice so as to avoid inadvertently reinforcing structures I am attempting to dismantle in my own teaching and research. My previous work does not significantly overlap with the CRT principles described by DeCuir and Dixon (2004). However, the Froebel curriculum I developed with Nicole touches on two of the tenets. Mainly, this project centered on race as property and counter-storytelling. I will briefly discuss the connections between the Froebel curriculum and critical race theory, but first I would like to provide some context of this work within the field of art education.

There is an emerging body of work that addresses issues of race as it pertains to art education. However, Gaztambide-Fernández et al. (2018) note that few researchers directly include critical race theory in their analysis. In their recent publication entitled *The Palgrave Handbook of Race and the Arts in Education*, Kraehe et al. (2018) begin to fill this lacuna in the scholarship on CRT in art education. Their handbook compiles a number of articles written

through a CRT lens by activists, educators, and scholars analyzing the role of race and racial injustice within the broad field of the arts. Though the authors included in this publication make up a fraction of scholars within the larger field of art education, it is crucial to see this level of analysis within a field that is largely impacted and informed by race. In the words of Gaztambide-Fernández et al. (2018):

As a field, the arts in education has been late to reckon with its racist past and white supremacist present. This is in part because the scholarship of the arts in education has been largely about arts advocacy, and as such, there has been a general reluctance among arts educators and researchers to recognize, theorize, and address the ways in which the arts operate in relation to and are implicated in white supremacy. (p. 2)

The authors included in this publication, along with others, have begun to broaden the critical discourse of race and art education, but there is still much more to be written about and considered. In their reflection of the relationship between CRT and education over the past twenty years, Dixon and Rousseau Anderson (2017) state “our most important recommendation is for us to collectively seek to ensure that CRT becomes more than an intellectual movement” (p. 50). In that vein, educators across various levels of instruction, should consider sharing the practical applicability of critical race pedagogy in order to promote and encourage additional implementation of this conceptual framework and teaching strategy. Carbado (2011), however, warns educators and scholars to proceed with caution. According to Carbado, the absence of clear and distinct parameters of CRT, may potentially “render the *idea* of CRT more important than the *ideas* within CRT” (p. 1626). This advice should help strengthen future critical race pedagogy and is not intended to dissuade anyone from attempting to incorporate CRT in their pedagogical or theoretical practice.

Critical race theory works to deconstruct and make visible the ways in which whiteness has been constructed as the normative baseline. Harris (1993) addresses the notion of whiteness as property and how the concepts of property have shifted over time to include status as property. This notion of status as property and whiteness as normative has resulted in severe inequity of education of students of color. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) explain that one of the problems with treating whiteness as property in an educational context is that discussions of race are omitted, or if race is addressed it is treated as an ideological construct and the depth and analysis of race is stunted because it does not reflect the historical and political complexity at the root of the issue. By centering the white experience, schools, curriculum, and broader cultural forms sustain Western-Eurocentric cultural capital and promote cultural assimilation of students of color. The impact of assimilation is the attempt to strip Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and all students of color of their cultural identity (McKinley & Brayboy, 2005). Yosso (2017) further notes that schools have historically taken a deficit approach to students of color situating them as passive vessels and promoting the banking model of education critiqued by Freire (1968). Whiteness as property attempts to erase the history and stories of students of color and eliminate cultural knowledge in order to create apathetic and easily malleable students who are uncritical of oppressive social structures.

Gaztambide-Fernández (2013, 2020) works to more clearly display the ways in which current articulations of art education reaffirm whiteness as property and have been historically used as a tool of assimilation and acculturation of non-white students in educational settings. He explains that *the arts* have been imbued with an imaginative power to transform and inspire change in students yet build their core curricular framework around Eurocentric aesthetics which are framed as a sort of tool of salvation for marginalized students (Gaztambide-Fernández,

2020). Gaztambide-Fernández et al. (2018) present an additional challenge of the role of whiteness as property within art education, they state:

To elevate other objects and practices to the category of “the arts” is also to place them as the property (at least temporarily and often precariously) of Whites, to make them *consumable* by whiteness. This means that the manner by which those objects are engaged and determined as “the arts” is itself a marker of whiteness. (p. 17)

The existing approach to art education restricts the possible critical and transformative capacities which can be generated through art education if we are able to make a collective shift within the field to center a critical analysis of race and racialized forms of representation. In effect, Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) argues that the arts don’t actually do anything other than reproduce current oppressive structures. He proposes a broader analysis of art education’s discursive constructs and suggests a shift in curricular approaches to work from a space of cultural production (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2020). This slight reorientation within the field would allow art educators to center an analysis of important and pertinent subjects such as race, culture, class, representation, and history which enable a deeper understanding of social structures and which work to raise different sets of questions that help better understand how the arts can be instrumental in shifting discursive and conceptual orientations and enacting social transformation.

CRT scholars frequently reference the concept of *double consciousness* proposed by W. E. B. Du Bois. Shuford (2001) explains that Du Bois realized the idea of double consciousness to illustrate the task the Black community endures in seeing themselves defined and measured through the lens of white normativity while simultaneously centering the Black experience as providing a critical perspective of society and striving to use this awareness to “motivate

collective action” (p. 316). Anzaldúa’s (2015) concept of *nepantla* mirrors Du Bois’s double consciousness for the Chicanx experience. The state of *nepantla* helps articulate the liminal position of Latinx people beyond racial categorization and helps to point to multiple sites of intersectional and often contradictory experiences (Anzaldúa, 2015). Anzaldúa advocates for critical approaches to art making and cultural production as a means through which to extrapolate and understand our own positionality within a state of *nepantla*. Through these modes, we also resist fixed definitions and are granted the permission to play with language and concepts through various forms of artistic production. This process centered in an exploration of *nepantla* or *double consciousness* allows us to reinvent the self and our ideas. *Multipositionality* proposed by Morales (2018), and briefly discussed above, shares similarities to double consciousness and *nepantla*. Given the multiplicity of scholars working to theorize the liminal positionality of people of color, we would certainly benefit from a varied approach to understanding the nuances in how different people from a variety of contexts understand and articulate this experience through multiple forms, including the arts.

As we move toward integrating critical approaches to art education curriculum, we must also be cautious to prevent inadvertently reinforcing narrow perceptions of identity and culture. While ethnic studies help to offer students opportunities through which to see themselves and their histories reflected in their learning spaces, a reductive framing of ethnic studies runs the risk of limiting modes of identification as well as artistic and aesthetic production. These traps are often built upon assumptions of cultural authenticity. Cultural critic Rey Chow (1993) addresses and challenges the sustained use and application of the illusion of *the native* as a site of representation. Chow pays attention to how non-Western subjects are depicted in a variety of contexts both within and outside of academic discourse. She challenges us to disrupt the insider-

outsider binary by revealing the way in which modernity's fascination with authenticity creates and upholds representational contradictions that fix marginalized subjects in time and place. Chow turns the tables and places cultural producers under the microscope, asking us to reflect on how we are complicit in sustaining discourses that construct various ideological subjects, and how we can work to deconstruct such fixed positions. Chow pushes us to complicate our understanding of the colonial gaze to reveal an entangled dynamic between the imperial and subaltern subject position. Chow illustrates how regardless of whether a marginal figure is depicted in a positive or a negative manner, the process of representation passes through the producer and is created through a process of comparison to the *dominant* group.

Performance and cultural theorist José E. Muñoz (1999) developed the concept of disidentification as a “strategy of resistance and survival” (p. 5). This orientation moves beyond dualistic framings of power deployed through racialized assimilationist rhetoric that informs understandings of identity formations (Muñoz, 1999). Disidentification can serve as a critical and liberatory opening through which to work from an already complicated and often contradictory intersectional understanding of identity. Muñoz cites French linguist Michel Pêcheux as having developed an early form of disidentification modeled after Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's work on subject formation (Muñoz, 1999). Muñoz explains that Pêcheux developed three concepts to explain the way in which ideologies function to construct subjects. The *good subject* is understood through the process of identification with dominant ideologies (Muñoz, 1999). The *bad subject* is reflected in those who reject and rebel against normative ideologies and *counteridentify* with prescriptive labels (Muñoz, 1999). This identifier is positioned to work in opposition to dominant belief structures. Muñoz explains Pêcheux's concern that counter cultures work to potentially sustain dominant culture through their very oppositional stance

(Muñoz, 1999). Normative ideologies are kept alive because of the tension and constant dispute between the *good* and *bad* subject. Muñoz describes the third concept of subject formation, disidentification, as neither adapting to nor resisting hegemonic structures (Muñoz, 1999). Instead, I understand Muñoz's disidentification to be about transforming and redefining ideologies so that we can see the fluidity and possible contrary aspects of individuals shaped by various racialized manifestations of oppressive power structures. This concept allows us to embrace the impermanence of identity and ideological beliefs, and to holistically process our palimpsestic influences which can minimize didactic approaches to artwork and instead yield complex forms of cultural production.

Alarcón (1994) also interrogates the idea of pure origins of thought, theory, and truth, she reminds us that purity and authenticity do not exist yet are ideologically formed and sustained. She warns us of the possible dangers of being beholden to the past and future, where the illusion of future development can also contribute to fixed ideas of mythical past and traditions. Alarcón encourages us to occupy the space at the boarder of meaning, to avoid reinscribing fixed parameters around our understanding and explanation of subjects and concepts. Alarcón places Gloria Anzaldúa and Jean-Luc Nancy in conversation centered around Anzaldúa's concept of *mestizaje*. Alarcón points to an important paradox at work in the use and resistance of meaning and definitions. While Nancy reveals the way meaning pins down and possibly essentializes a concept, Alarcón reminds us that important historical contextual information risks erasure if we do not attempt to assign definitions and some sort of framework from which to build from. Alarcón also reminds us that the process of naming or assigning meaning is a temporary action because these descriptions are incomplete and therefore constantly shifting. Alarcón helps to provide partial language, skills, and strategies for a continually mobile identity and temporary

ideological landing points. Ethnic studies curriculum often leans on essentializing forms of representation and would benefit from deeper consideration and analysis of forms of representation and discourse to avoid reinscribing oppressive binary structures.

Soldatenko (2009) offers a brief overview of the formation of Chicanx¹ studies and explains the philosophical divide that fractured the foundational principles of the field of study. He explains that two factions of Chicanx studies emerged shortly after the institutional development of this field of study, they are perspectivist epistemology and empirical Chicanx studies. The perspectivist framework rejected the social sciences and advocated for the Chicanx self-image as a point of departure for the production of knowledge (Soldatenko, 2009). Additionally, perspectivists promoted critical deconstruction of Western epistemologies and worked to revise systems of knowledge as they informed understandings of the self (Soldatenko, 2009). Supporters of empirical Chicanx studies believed that educational institutions, specifically universities, could function as political tools through which to reconfigure existing biased and reductive narratives of the Chicanx experience (Soldatenko, 2009). Soldatenko notes that the empirical approach to Chicanx studies was easier to mold into an institutional setting and the perspectivist methods eventually waned in comparison. However, Soldatenko complicates the concession of the institutionalization of Chicanx studies by pointing to the ways in which the initial radical foundations of Chicanx studies were suppressed within a university setting. Soldatenko's book reaffirms my perception of the limitations of enacting critical pedagogy exclusively within institutional learning spaces. Even though Soldatenko positioned two founding factions of Chicanx studies in opposition to one another, they both sought to better

¹ Soldatenko (2009) uses the term Chicano in his writing. The political and stylistic choice to use the term Chicanx allows for an inclusive term that moves away from gendered language.

inform the world in order to enact generative change and disrupt existing narratives and power structures. I cannot help but wonder what could have been possible if rather than create factions and quarrel amongst themselves, early Chicanx studies leaders, armed with disidentification as a strategy for deconstructing power, worked together to implement both approaches to the field strategically. Both approaches combined and working to inform one another may have been better positioned to enact change through multiple sites and amplify the scope of a collective intervention.

Soldatenko's (2009) work reminded me of my own limitations implementing the Froebel curriculum within a public-school setting. It quickly became evident that the structures of educational systems, with their own histories and shortcomings, prevented a holistic and possibly radically transformative iteration of this curriculum. The power dynamic between teacher and student, the assessment criteria, and the historic oppressive structures of educational institutions limited the potential scope of this curriculum. This is not to say that we should not attempt to integrate critical approaches to curricular strategies in schools, but that we also need to consider how to support these efforts in and outside of the classroom. Nicole and I offered students opportunities to make connections to this work outside of the school building. Students facilitated public art workshops that incorporated the Froebel history at The Chicago Cultural Center. Students had the opportunity to present their work at various conferences and exhibited their artwork at local galleries. Other students began to make connections between the material presented in the Froebel curriculum with contemporary social justice movements and became directly involved in various local organizing movements.

I hesitate to suggest an embrace of community arts spaces as an alternative to institutional education. Miranda Joseph (2002) employs a feminist framework to problematize and analyze

the meaning and use of community and illuminates the impediments of non-profit organizations. Joseph works from a Marxist framework to articulate the imbricated relationship between community and capitalism. She argues that capitalism benefits from and utilizes community structures to strengthen social hierarchies of difference and oppression and works to reveal how the illusion of community can be exclusive as well as inclusive depending on a subject's positionality (Joseph, 2002). However, I feel that there were a few missed opportunities in this book, and the narrow focus on limited structural frameworks ignores key discursive entry points to further understand and deconstruct capitalism, the most prominent area being race. The very brief mention and larger omission of race enacts further violence and contributes to the silences that then attempt to divorce the very embedded relationship between race and capitalism on local, national, and global scales across time. In spite of the exclusion of a critical analysis of how racial categorization intersects with capitalists' frameworks of community, Joseph does point to the limitation of organizations beholden to the non-profit industrial complex. These spaces harbor their own potentially restrictive configuration and become an extension of the institutional learning spaces depending on their funding structures. In order to circumvent the constraints imposed by institutional and community learning spaces, I propose an embrace of intergenerational, interdisciplinary, non-institutional environments. These spaces are not new and in fact decolonial scholars are working to remind us that these practices have roots in Indigenous communities and have resisted colonial erasure (Simpson, 2017).

Cultural production as proposed by Gaztambide-Fernández (2013, 2020) might offer an entry point through which art educators, teaching in multiple spaces, can work toward integrating a CRT perspective and enact the transformative capabilities of artistic production. However, it should be understood that this proposition only serves as a temporary landing point and not

necessarily a blanket solution for the historic and deeply ingrained power structures that have become firmly rooted in our social imaginary, but which are not impossible to detangle. I am interested in what this approach to art education that focuses on culturally relevant topics might generate. Resisting positivist discourse of the arts, Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) proposes that we think about the artistic process as a form of cultural production. He problematizes this concept as well, but he invites us to work through potential contradictions. If we frame our artistic practice as a form of cultural production, we are asked to critically reflect on how racialized power informs representation and making. We need to consider how we either challenge or reinforce stereotypes and cultural assumptions through our own work. This line of questioning might also prompt us to imagine aesthetic forms that move away from binary structures. I would argue that this also applies to our teaching practice. Curriculum is a form of cultural production and we need to be intentional about the information we include and the ideologies we support and privilege. Reframing our practice as artists and educators as a form of cultural production is no small charge. Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) challenges us beyond the notion of art for art's sake to a practice that asks us to critically examine the ideas and content reflected in the material we produce and promulgate. Critical race theory paired with cultural production can support students in deciphering and mapping their own cultural identity and representation to arrive at multiple consciousness.

Critical race theory recognizes experiential knowledge and challenges epistemological frameworks while simultaneously centering typically marginalized voices that help generate a more expansive understanding of the world. The Froebel curriculum guided students through a process of reconstructing a concealed narrative of youth resistance. Nicole shared her research materials with the students and posed questions to encourage students to arrive at their own

speculative narratives. For example, one student taught himself how to animate his drawings to illustrate the events leading up to the event mentioned earlier where a police officer was hit in the face by a flying brick. Another student created a mixtape imagining the soundtrack of the student lock-in. Students began to combine Nicole's data with their own fictional narratives. The process of recovering the history allowed us to use counter-storytelling as an analytical tool for why this historical moment had all but disappeared from collective consciousness, and my sharing of the curriculum provides a first-person narrative of the project.

The wider field of art education must no longer avoid critical discussions of race. There are a number of strategies being implemented by educators across the world that work toward incremental racial justice. The central CRT tenant that racism is endemic to our society initially felt daunting, however, I am beginning to understand that the work can exist in a total revolt and reconstruction of oppressive frameworks *and* that racial justice is enacted in the small conceptual liberatory actions (Grande, 2018). The inspiration for these actions might not always surge in a classroom setting, and we should remember that learning happens at all times and in multiple spaces, including non-institutional and intergenerational locations. Racial justice is still the overarching goal, but its pace and effectiveness need not be defined by potentially limiting frameworks that are supposed to make us feel defeated and overwhelmed. I am excited to continue to celebrate the work of the individuals who are on the ground implementing effective strategies and imagine ways in which CRT and cultural production can assist my future work and the work of other art educators.

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A Letter of Introduction to the Theoretical Framings of Collectives

Dearest friends,

I was not aware that community was such an important part of my life until I moved away from my family and home city to attend art school in the Bay Area. It took moving to a new city where I was completely alone to realize how much I depended on my various communities in Chicago. I suppose that's why there are numerous colloquialisms about not taking things, people, situations for granted. I wonder about the incongruity of understanding a concept like this, yet also simultaneously being fully unaware when it is happening and being unable to intervene until the moment has passed. Being conscious of a concept is very different from feeling it or understanding it through lived experience (Rocha, 2014). How can we learn to notice what we don't already know or are attuned to? Perhaps it is inconsequential to attempt to anticipate or evade the feelings of longing or nostalgia before they occur. To do so would keep our attention fixed solely in the nervous anticipation of the future rather than attempting to exist and learn from the past and the current moment. Instead of anxiously anticipating something that we cannot know, perhaps what we need is a reminder to process and reflect on the moments that have passed. An awareness of self and how we interact with others and the world around us, based on past experiences, might also help to strengthen our attunement to better detect how relational processes informs our evolving experiences and plan for the future.

Community has been an important concept for me since my realization of the power and impact that intentional relationships can have on our sense of self and the world. My participation in the Chicago ACT Collective has reminded me of the power of collaborative learning and making. Additionally, my sustained engagement with you all, who have become chosen family, has helped me be better aware of myself and others. Collectives are not new

structures. Each iteration of a collective composition reflects specific contextual dynamics. I turn to our group to ask: *What can an artist collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change? How can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning? What are the manifestations of being-with that extend beyond built communities? How do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

Collectives are groups of people who intentionally form small communities around shared interests and goals. The impetus for collective configurations varies and is contingent on contextual circumstances. Collectives have been in existence before this term emerged in our lexicon in the early 15th century (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The intentionality around the formation of collectives is an important factor to consider. In a study of sociopolitical aesthetic orientations in contemporary art, art historian Kim Charnley (2021) repeatedly notes the ambiguity of the term collectivity and its often contradictory deployment. However, he critiques the philosopher John Searle for not differentiating distinctions between varying configurations of collectives. According to Charnley, Searle places artist collectives under a similar interpretive umbrella as banks and armies. Understanding deliberate grouping helps us differentiate between a collective and other forms of social configurations or communities where people come together yet do not necessarily get to select the other members of the group, or do not have a collective focus. For example, in a previous letter I shared how my family functioned as an early example of the power of collective living. However, the members of my immediate and extended family are united through a tracing of shared ancestry. I understand that families are composed through a number of groupings not always predicated on biological relationships. For example, I have noted in “A Letter About Rope as a Metaphor for Collectivity” that our own collective structure

can help extend our thinking around understandings of family and kinship. However, the distinction that intentional choice introduces is important but is also not meant to impose restrictions around our understanding of what collective structures can teach us. While we may learn to collaborate collectively in various settings, this is not the same as deciding to form a group and be in purposeful relation with others. For example, I am very lucky to be part of a wonderful cohort of art education graduate students. Even though we all chose to apply and enroll in our program, we did not select one another as colleagues. We have formed a supportive community because we believe this to be an important aspect of our learning experience. In this way we have chosen to be in relation, but we were brought together through forces outside of ourselves. We can learn to apply collective structures to existing communities, this might help to strengthen these units. Although some groups don't always form under deliberate motives, the decision to commit to collaborate with others around a common goal or vision allows collective structures to manifest.

Collectives, like any community, can run the risk of recreating imbalances of power. Such dynamics can create toxic environments. If we are not already attuned to how oppressive power functions it can be difficult to disrupt these structures. Even those who are familiar with such unjust systems can also unintentionally reproduce destructive and violent communities. Collectives are not necessarily the solution to all social and political problems. This is especially the case if we do not cultivate a critical lens through which we reflect on our role within and outside of collectives but also on the structure itself. One criticism of collectives is that they mirror a clique culture (Marion et al., 2016). Cliques bring to mind images of the tyrannical character Regina George from the movie *Mean Girls* (2004). Stark boundaries can be erected

around collectives that can create a clear demarcation between those who are granted entry to the group and those who remain on the outside looking in, longing for a sense of belonging.

In spite of this possible parallel to cliques, collectives, modeled through the Chicago ACT Collective and others, work to fracture oppressive structures at all levels. Cliques pride themselves on their exclusivity as a marker of their uniqueness or singularity. However, collectives, if approached through an expansive framework, can serve as spaces where we can challenge illusions of individuality while simultaneously reflecting on our discrete becoming. This can be achieved through intentional collaborative interactions and reflection.

We model inclusivity predicated on respect and understanding of difference. We believe that part of our strength lies in the differences each member contributes to the group. Our collective structure does not pretend to mold or reflect a singular or universal articulation or understanding of the world. As poet Anaïs Duplan (2020) reminds us, this allows us to take into consideration and build from a wider range of issues and perspectives. I honor and respect each of our differences, these points of departure can help strengthen our group and broader interventions.

Hasta la próxima,

Pau

A Letter About Collectives and Social Movements

Camarades,¹⁸

Artist collectives, specifically, have been in existence for a considerable amount of time. Yet, this history is yet to be comprehensively documented. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (2007) note this gap in art history in the introduction to their edited book *Collectivism After Modernism*. The obscured history of artist collectives works to reinforce individualistic conceptions of artistic production. Charnley (2021), however, claims that this is no longer the case. He states, “it has become part of the art world’s professional ‘common sense’ that all art is created collectively” (Charnley, 2021, p. 41). Here, Charnley’s observation about the elusiveness of various conceptualizations of collectivity is noteworthy. I had a middle school teacher, Mr. McFarlan, who used to say, “common sense is not so common” (personal communication, 1998). Black feminists teach us that the personal is political (Lorde, 1984; Taylor, 2017). As such the notion of common sense is precarious as it implies universal understanding that do not take into account the various structural and material conditions that inform our position and world view. I don’t believe that Charnley’s (2012) use of scare quotes alleviates the homogenizing implication of common sense, even if their use was intended to insinuate discrepancies. The implication remains the same, suggesting there is a broad understanding and acceptance of the collective nature of artistic production. While Charnley notes there is wider evidence and acceptance of collectivity within the contemporary art world, he also examines how this embrace is not entirely evident and has not significantly or directly impacted dynamics within the broader mechanisms of the art world. The contradictions Charnley returns to may perhaps be part of the reason why even though collectives are and have been integral to our social formations, they remain largely

¹⁸ See footnote 10.

untheorized. Although Marion et al. (2016) explain that while collectivism is a current idea circulating in academic discourse, the principles of collectivity have been explored through different labels such as complexity theory and relational theory. I wonder if rather than frame perceived discrepancies under negative connotations, contradictions were embraced as openings for previously overlooked connections or generative points of divergence, we might see more examples of investigations and analysis of collectivity across numerous disciplines.

Stimson & Sholette (2007) note various historical causes for the emergence of collective structures across history. Specifically, they focus on socio-political motives for the formation of artist collective after the Second World War. This significant moment in global history reverberates in many forms in our present moment. In effect, the impetus for various collective structures shifts according to historical context (Stimson & Sholette, 2007). For example, Charnley (2021) explains that the historical avant-gardes of the 1920s were influenced by utopian possibilities that spurred from the Russian Revolution. Additionally, Charnley surmises that there is a correlation between economic fluctuations and emphasis on collectivity.

The interconnected dynamics of current and historical social, political, and economic factors can be traced to the history of imperialism and colonialism prompted by humanist orientations that developed during the Renaissance era (Wynter, 2003). In the analysis of sociopolitical aesthetics, Charnley (2021) alludes to this history, but by placing an almost singular focus on economic factors through an analysis of neoliberalism, the broad effects and impact of colonialism are obscured. Additionally, tangential calls for decolonization of the art world (Charnley, 2021) perpetuates colonial violence by deploying decoloniality as a metaphor and undermining the work of Indigenous scholars (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Theorist Ronak K. Kapadia (2019) states, “there is often an unseen cultural and ideological dimension to what is

conventionally understood as “merely” political or economic” (p. 19). To deny these overlapping structures is to continue to theorize and function within hegemonic orientations. Camnitzer (2020) reminds us, “politics is a strategy. Art is a tool to implement that strategy” (p. 216). He contends that the term *political art* is gratuitous as it creates a hierarchical distinction between art and *political art* negating the already existing relationship between art and politics (Camnitzer, 2020). Studying artist collectives across history, their formations and interventions, might help to build wider openings for demonstrating the imbricated history and enduring relationship between aesthetics and politics.

The 19th century saw numerous geopolitical shifts as a result of ongoing imperialism in spite of surging revolutionary resistance (Wynter, 1995). Technological innovations significantly shifted modes of production and helped bolster capitalism through new mass production and global markets. The introduction of communism as an alternative to oppressive classist divides appeared in 1848 through the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Marx & Engels, 1966). The myopic exclusions and miscalculations of Marx and Engels that omit considerations of intersections of oppression beyond class have not gone unnoticed (Taylor, 2017). However, the theories presented by Marx and Engels were rooted in the desire to significantly transform conditions for economically oppressed and exploited people. The lasting effects of the introduction of communism to our collective consciousness is undeniable. However, when discussions of collectivity build from a Marxist framework exclusively, we render Indigenous forms of collectivity invisible.

Stimson & Sholette (2007) and Charnely (2021) note a more pronounced emergence of collectives during and after the late 1960s and 1970s. The global surge in direct political action and intervention during this time period has been documented in various forms. The current

dominant histories focus on key individuals as central to many of the monumental shifts in global history. Typically, when organized groups are mentioned in historical narratives, they are introduced through founding members or key figures. In the biography of Ella Baker, Barbara Ransby (2005) highlights the extensive behind the scenes work that was integral to the Black freedom movement during the Civil Rights era. The labor and efforts of numerous individuals are eclipsed by key, typically male figures, who are framed as individual heroes in historical narratives. At first pass it may appear contradictory to address the erasure of collective efforts in political struggles through the biography of a single person. However, Ransby points to the broad collective endeavors of a movement by placing emphasis on Baker's grassroots organizing that spanned across numerous locations and communities. In effect, Ransby not only works to reclaim the narrative of a key Civil Rights figure who often gets eclipsed by her male counterparts, but also places additional significance on the need to center narratives of one of the most historically marginalized communities in this country, Black women. Even though we may have noticed an escalation of collectives, the broader social lexicon appears to be tethered to racialized individualistic perceptions.

One important example of collective organizing that has left an impressionable mark on history is the work of the Black Panther Party (BPP). The BPP formed as an organization in Oakland, CA in 1966 to challenge police brutality plaguing Black communities (Newton, 1972). Local chapters quickly surfaced across the country and inspired international chapters. Their Ten Point Program served as a manifesto for shared goals and offered a unifying vision for the expansive organization. The details of the platform along with other relevant articles and poetry were disseminated through the BPP newspaper. Included in the publications were bold graphic images designed by Emory Douglas, *Revolutionary Artist* and minister of culture for the BPP.

Douglas was instrumental in developing bold and powerful imagery that reflected the values of the BPP. Art became an instrumental vehicle for the BPP who desired to inspire a cultural revolution aided in part by Douglas's imagery (Lampert, 2013).

In addition to promoting self-defense and collective vigilance and care for Black communities, the Black Panther Party's legacy continues through the introduction of free meals programs and local community health clinics (Watkins, 2005). The BPP worked with their membership to address a number of pressing needs not being met through existing structures and organized to implement self-created alternatives (Newton, 1972). The power and influence of the Black Panther Party was clearly perceived as a threat to dominant forces as the organization was infiltrated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as part of the COINTELPRO program aimed at investigating radical national organizations that were perceived as dangerous to national interests (Santisteban, 2020). The coded language used by government officials to justify the murder and criminalization of various significant leaders within the BPP that lead to the disintegration of the organization is not surprising. We continue to see evidence of how not only government structures, but most centralized systems of power, were not constructed to impart justice equally; they were formed around racially biased ideologies set to protect white supremacist systems (Crenshaw, 2011). The history of the Black Panther Party along with various other examples of collective organizing during the 1960s-70s serve to remind us that this type of focused mobilization is perceived as a danger to dominant hegemonic systems of power (Santisteban, 2020). I believe this to be part of the reason why collective structures remain largely untheorized and unexamined. However, the Black Panther Party continues to function as an example of what organized communities can achieve through a shared vision, especially when we allow our plans to shift and transform along the way.

The African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AfriCOBRA) formed in Chicago in 1968 (Tate, n.d.). The founding members of this artist collective, Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Wadsworth Jarrell, and Gerald Williams sought to not only create a space for Black artists who were historically excluded from institutional spaces, but also to “depict the humanity of African Americans” (Zorach, 2019, p. 7). Art historian Rebecca Zorach (2019) traces a shift in the orientation of printmaker Barbara Jones-Hogu’s artwork. Zorach notes that beyond depicting relevant issues impacting Black communities Jones-Hogu, in line with the AfriCOBRA’s impetus to bend time by considering the past, present, and future simultaneously, adapted her imagery to reflect action-oriented work. This transition reflected a reorientation of Jones-Hogu’s intended audience to speak directly to Black communities rather than attempt to educate white viewers about the history of oppression (Zorach, 2019). Zorach notes that Jones-Hogu and other AfriCOBRA members’ artwork has been dismissed as propaganda. However, this framing serves as an easy dismissal of artwork with a clearly articulated political orientation intended for an explicit audience. Camnitzer (2020) reminds us that this type of disregard is a byproduct of the encoded signification of terms like *political art* that reinforce a divided stance between those who are already aligned with the reflected beliefs or not. Camnitzer’s illustration of the function of descriptors such *political art* is not mean to deter politically oriented work. As mentioned above, I believe the intent is to serve as a reminder of how hierarchies are created within artistic categories that position *political art* as less worthy than *art* even though aesthetics and politics are always already imbricated. It is clear that Jones-Hogu was intentional about her position and audience. Zorach’s (2019) review of Jones-Hogu’s artist statements and master’s thesis reveal a specific desire to create artwork for Black communities. Emory Douglas and Jones-Hogu along with other members of AfriCOBRA shared precision in their focus on creating imagery for Black

viewership irrespective of their acceptance by a predominantly white Eurocentric art industry, and this was a political and revolutionary act.

The history of Chicanx artistic interventions during the movement era of the 1960s and 1970s places heavy emphasis on locations such as California and New York (Noriega et al., 2011; Caragol Barreto, 2013). Yet, Chicanx artists across the country were moved and inspired by the Black freedom struggle of the Civil Rights movement. Chicanx artists also sought to create imagery that reflected the people and stories of their communities. Similar to Black artists, muralism and printmaking were popular forms utilized by Chicanx artist because of the broad public accessibility of the medium. The current exhibition *¡Printing the Revolution! The Rise and Impact of Chicano Graphics, 1965 to Now* curated by E. Carmen Ramos & Claudia Zapata (2021) explores the use and development of print graphics as a medium for social justice and the adaptation of the form to digital platforms in recent years. The early prints included in this exhibition along with murals at sites like the now National Historic Landmark Chicano Park in San Diego, CA reflect some of the visual language deployed by Chicanx artists at the time.

The artist collective Asco founded by Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie Herrón, Gronk, and Patssi Valdez formed in 1971 in East Los Angeles took a different approach than their muralist and printmaker artist counterparts (Lampert, 2013). Cultural theorist Leticia Alvarado (2018) describes:

Asco less as a concrete group and more as a porous organizing energy, and abject structure of feeling, traversed by collaborative productions, beckoned by personal ties to the individual members collectively called Asco and the “asco”—meaning nausea or disgust in Spanish—that propelled this countercultural community. (p. 59)

Asco stands out because of their political aesthetic strategy of abjection deployed against politics of respectability that were heavily contested by the group. Rather than contribute toward homogenizing representations of the Chicana community, Asco deployed experimental artistic interventions to think beyond and perform alterity (Alvarado, 2018). They leaned into the generative possibilities of negative affect to prompt their collaborators and audience to consider the racialized power dynamics that create the material and affective conditions of minoritarian subjects (Alvarado, 2018). This was in direct contrast to their contemporaries who utilized a strategy of *positive* representations that, while effective in some contexts, also presented limitations in its capacity to move beyond already existing structures and understandings of marginalized identities.

In recent years we have seen a resurgence of interest in collectives (Stimson & Sholette, 2007; Charnley, 2021). Our current socio-political conditions and the waning effects of late-stage capitalism have prompted many to shift our focus away from centralized forms of power. Perhaps this perceived renewed interest in collectives is pointing to a shift in focus. What is a resurgence anyway? Collective structures have been in existence and have persisted across time and in response to various contextual historical moments. Instead of framing this as a resurgence or a turn in cultural history, we might assume that collectives perpetually exist. While some groups such as the Guerrilla Girls (n. d.) and Miss Rockaway Armada (n. d.) may receive more attention through media coverage or notoriety, others continue to function and intervene at multiple levels completely undetected or even recognized as a collective structure.

The lack of attention to the generative possibilities of collective structures is not surprising. Communal approaches to the world challenge existing hierarchical systems of power and control. United communities, formed around artistic endeavors or otherwise, working to

address issues from the bottom up or through systems of shared leadership threaten such structures, even at a small scale. However, the accumulation of what might feel like minor interventions can generate a powerful force such that this approach to life can threaten oppressive structures. At the very least, we learn to become more self-reliant and lean on our local communities for resources and support. This inevitably helps decentralize power while working to embolden communities to continue to move farther away from reliance on unjust structures.

History has taught us time and time again that people are resourceful and when our needs and interests are not being met or supported by the powers that be, communities will self-organize to attempt to care for one another as best they can. We can learn to extend these sorts of hyper-local systems of mutual aid and collective organizing in order to create self-sustaining communities that diminish our reliance on centralized systems. However, in order to prevent enacting further binary framings of collectivity, it is beneficial to become familiar with how collective structures are utilized as homogenizing forces. We must also continue to expand our own conceptualizations through continued dialogue whenever possible, granted we are not already depleted from the work of deconstructing and building alternatives to colonial forces. I consider myself immensely lucky to be able to learn about the power of collective structures directly through my own lived experience in relation to you all.

Hasta la próxima,

Pau

A Letter About Collectives and Dialogic Exchange

Familia,

Miranda Joseph (2002) argues against the romance of community challenging the fetishization of the past along a linear progressive understanding of time. She cautions against making assumptions about communal structures built from romanticized idealizations of the past. Joseph utilizes binary oppositional discursive models as examples for how community as a concept can be enshrined and framed along rigid dialectical approaches. Specifically, Joseph looks at the ways in which conservative and liberal groups assume oppositional stances in their understanding and deployment of community through pluralist assimilative narratives. She emphasizes the exploitation of desires of belonging and acceptance as key concepts used to shape normative communities. Stimson & Sholette (2007) convey a similar argument in their writing on collectives. They caution us from framing collectives as assumed automatic anti-imperialist forces. Stimson & Sholette explain that communal structures can:

Respond to and cultivate a yearning for an absolute and idealized form of collectivity, [making] the need for communality more pressing by reconstructing the glory of an imaginary social form, a holy-of-holies with its own intoxicating, often orgiastic, groupthink and groupfeel. (p. 2)

Collectives approached from this limited framework run the risk of reinscribing oppressive structures that reinforce binary thinking. This leaves little room for decentralizing systems of power. We need not look too far to see evidence of this in our current moment. Recent demonstrations and events that coincided with the last presidential election resulted in various clashes between oppositional social movements embodied through Antifa¹⁹ demonstrators and

¹⁹ “An anti-fascist movement” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

the Proud Boys.²⁰ Both groups have generated considerable support from their followers banding together under similar desires to defend and promote their own socio-political beliefs. However, these collisions illustrate the dangers of restrictive understandings of community shaped around binary frameworks. Oppositional stances create rigid divisions and leave little room for us to point to the systems that have created these bifurcations. Belonging can be deployed as a tool for social control (Joseph, 2002). Our desire to be part of a community makes us susceptible to becoming entrenched in a fixed opinion or position that tends to magnify divisions between groups of people. Collectives built around fixed inclusive membership structures construct an us vs. them, insider-outsider boundary (Joseph, 2002). This is an example of divide and conquer strategies that avert our attention from the structures that keep oppressed people fighting amongst one another rather than finding ways to collectively work together to dismantle the structures that created power imbalances and imagine other worlds. However, this requires that those who most benefit from close proximity to power and privilege relinquish their entitlement predicated on hierarchical structures. Collectives need not function this way. They can be spaces where we can be encouraged to stretch our thinking rather than promote fixed conceptualizations of the world and serve as spaces to model this behavior for those still not attuned to the mechanisms of oppressive power.

Activist and philosopher Grace Lee Boggs along with Scott Kurashige (2011) wrote:

We must have the courage to walk the talk, but we must also engage in the continuing dialogues that enable us to break free of old categories and create the new ideas that are

²⁰ “Established in the midst of the 2016 presidential election by VICE Media co-founder Gavin McInnes, the Proud Boys are self-described “Western chauvinists” who adamantly deny any connection to the racist “alt-right.” They insist they are simply a fraternal group spreading an “anti-political correctness” and “anti-white guilt” agenda” (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.).

necessary to address our realities, because revolutions are made not to prove the correctness of ideas but to begin anew. (p. 51)

Boggs & Kurashige remind us that it is necessary to extend the work beyond possibly siloed incubators of collective spaces. While collective groupings might help offer a space of comfort and solace from the broader world, if they remain closed off structures, the potential for impact is thwarted. Boggs & Kurashige also suggest that we extend our dialogic exchanges beyond those with whom we are already in ideological alignment. Doing so may have the dual effect of offering a point of divergent thinking for those we are in conversation with and extending our own thinking about our ideological position. This may take the form of reassessing our position or learning how to better articulate our ideas for others. If approached generatively, these exchanges might yield transformative results; perhaps not immediately, but hopefully someday in some recognizable form.

We can continue to study more expansive examples of collectives to learn how groups of people are and have worked together to challenge such structures and what kinds of alternatives have been deployed or can be imagined for our collective mutual flourishing.

Hasta la próxima,

Pau

A Letter About the Generative Possibilities of Collectives

Amigues²¹ querides,²²

Collective impulse for belonging is a driving force in the formation of communities. Yet, a desire for kinship often feels contradictory to narratives of individuality. This false juxtaposition need not be fueled. Collectives formed around expansive ideologies and values can enable members to develop a deeper awareness of self and others. There is no blueprint or model for how to enact this because each group dynamic is rooted in its own context and intersectional formation. We can, however, look to generative collective structures as examples for how we can learn to build relationships based on trust and mutual respect in order to work together to imagine and enact new visions for our world. We must learn how to adapt these values to our own communities and pull from various resources because there is no one-size fits all approach to this work. The dangers of closed off communities and a dominant emphasis on individuality threaten our ability to trust one another and learn to work together. We must also maintain a certain level of flexible criticality to our work so that we do not become myopic in our quest to achieve a more just world.

There is power in creativity and critical consciousness. This potential is not confined to existing often reductive conceptualizations of the arts through normative hegemonic frameworks. We have briefly experienced moments of revolutionary dissonance over the course of history because individuals and collectives imagined that a different world was possible. We have also learned through history that replacing one oppressive system with another is not the solution. We need to use these previous examples as lessons moving forward. We need to be able to reimagine

²¹ See footnote 4.

²² See footnote 3.

the entirety of the systems and we need to start with a dismantling of colonialism, capitalism, and humanist ideas of individualism.

Schooling has conditioned us to abide by order, rules, and systems established as a means of social control. We are taught to fear the absence of these structures and the potential threat of anarchy. However, this idea is premised on an hierarchical paternalistic ordering of power at its center. Fear of change is normal, but the assumption that we cannot exist outside of our current systems is dangerous because it keeps us indebted to our current ordering of the world.

Curriculum theorist Nina Asher (2010) addresses how we are all implicit in the colonialist agenda and challenges us to do the work to liberate our own thinking and work to push toward decolonized curriculum and learning spaces. Asher (2010) suggests that reflexivity and autobiography may be spaces from where to start to understand our position, privilege and oppression. This process can enable us to embrace Davis & Sumara's (2007) proposition of "the term *not-yet-imaginable* to refer to that space of possibilities that is opened up through the exploration of the current space of the possible" (p. 58). Before we can run, we must learn to walk, we need to understand the scope of the structures and spaces of opportunity in order to arrive at emergent concepts that extend beyond what is currently within our realm of possibility.

Collectives can offer spaces through which we can analyze the world, imagine alternatives, and enact our visions at a small scale. I believe that as people we have the capacity to reimagine distributions of power, that we can work toward developing new systems that do not perpetuate oppression. This cannot be achieved without a great deal of work, but I do not believe this is impossible even if these shifts, however minor, occur after my lifetime. I have been called idealistic in the past, but I choose to push myself into a further space of critical optimism.

I leave you with a quote from Grace Lee Boggs & Scott Kurashige (2011):

Now, in light of our historical experiences and thanks especially to the indigenous cultures that the Zapatistas have revealed to us, we are beginning to understand that the world is always made and never finished; that activism can be the journey rather than the arrival; that struggle doesn't always have to be confrontational but can take the form of reaching out to find common ground with the many "others" in our society who are also seeking ways out from alienation, isolation, privatization, and dehumanization by corporate globalization. (p. 48)

Con un chingo de amor,

Pau

II.

Chapter 4: EXCERPTS FROM CONVERSATIONS WITH THE CHICAGO ACT COLLECTIVE

A Letter About the Chicago ACT Collective Conversations

Dearest friends,

I had the immense pleasure and privilege of spending time in purposeful conversation with almost every member of the Chicago ACT Collective. Those who were unable to meet for a conversation contributed to our collective inquiry in other ways. In the six years of our collective configuration, we have gathered as an entire group, in smaller groupings and, on occasion, one-on-one. However, this was the first time I spent dedicated time with many of you, and I feel fortunate to have been able to engage in conversation and learning while continuing to build collective bonds. I am excited to share excerpts from our conversations.

I want to share a bit about the process that I used for the one-on-one conversations and a few observations that surfaced while I was compiling the selected excerpts that follow. ACT Collective members who were able to participate met with me through the video conferencing platform Zoom to discuss the research questions that I drafted for our inquiry. These questions served as a guide and entry point for our conversation:

- *What can an artist collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change?*
- *How can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning?*
- *What are the manifestations of being-with that extend beyond built communities?*
- *How do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

The questions offered opening for discussion and each conversation inevitably veered in a slightly different direction according to the interests of and responses provided by each collective member. I was intentional about starting each session with space and time to check-in and simply chat before transitioning to the more formal conversation that was marked by enabling the recording function in Zoom. Each conversation lasted anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half. A few conversations extended past this time constraint for different reasons, but mostly that the opening conversations enthusiastically covered a range of topics and recent events. Before recording, I explained the format of the conversation and reviewed the questions. Importantly, I notified everyone that we could stop the conversation at any point. Prior to delving into the prepared questions, I asked everyone to introduce themselves and describe the collective. I found it incredibly humbling to be reminded of everyone's modesty and humility, especially during these introductions.

Each recorded conversation was transcribed. The written text and audio recordings were then shared with each corresponding member of the collective. I asked each to review their transcript and point to sections of the recording that felt most salient – this was an invitation and not a requirement, given that everyone had various responsibilities and limited time – and I used these notes when editing the excerpts that are included here. When participants were unable to offer this type of input, I was tasked with the responsibility of selecting and editing the content. I took care to ensure that each conversation excerpt maintained the integrity of each person's voice, as well as reflected the spirit of our conversation. After editing each section to reflect roughly a quarter of the full conversation, I shared the edited excerpts with each corresponding member. Again, I asked each person to review and offer feedback on the edited text if they were able and willing.

Whenever possible throughout this process, I welcomed feedback and input from members of the collective. In addition to the recorded conversations, members were invited and encouraged to submit work that either responded to the research questions or built on ideas we discussed; those submissions are included with the conversation excerpts. Two members of the collective were unable to meet to record conversations, but they offered other contributions.

As a reminder, the following section will feel different from the rest. I temporarily veer from the letter form in honor of the many voices who have contributed to this work. What follows, includes excerpts from our conversations and other submissions that were shared. For the sake of time and clarity, I omitted large segments of the full conversations; these excerpts are partial glimpses of much lengthier interactions. Given that I have included contributions from each member of the collective and that we are a large collective, this section is admittedly long. However, in the spirit of collectivity and relational meaning-making, it was important to dedicate space within this dissertation to feature the voices, ideas, and talents of each member of the collective.

I am excited to share this with you all.

Con mucho cariño,

Pau

Jessica Mueller

Figure 10.

En this Juntos by Jessica Mueller



Note. Jessica Mueller, *En this Juntos*, 2022, Chicago ACT Collective, Gouache on Papyrus Paper, 17.5" x 15". Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 11.

Detail of En this Juntos by Jessica Mueller



Note. Jessica Mueller, *En this Juntos* (detail), 2022, Chicago ACT Collective, Gouache on Papyrus Paper, 17.5" x 15". Image courtesy of the artist.

Jessica Mueller (JM): My name is Jessica Mueller. I'm a Chicago-based artist and an educator. I've lived in Chicago for about 20 years. I teach all kinds of things, mostly visual arts based. I teach graphic design and illustration for young adults at the college level and a big niche of mine is working in communities and working with parents doing arts integration and empowerment type of classes. And then I have two teens, which are a major part of my life and who I am.

Paulina Camacho Valencia (PCV): *Tell me a little bit about your journey with the Chicago ACT Collective.*

JM: I can't believe so much time has passed, but I remember when William and Sarah got the grant [to form the collective]. I didn't know Sarah very well; I knew William better. I don't really know the ins and outs of how they decided who to invite to the table but I was on that list somehow. We had our first meeting at Spudnik Press. I thought, "Oh, what is this? I love being a part of things like this." When it comes to actually making, I thrive off of collective making. That's where I'm really super comfortable. It just really felt good to be a part of something. I always assumed Chicago has such a small arts community, everybody knows each other. The art education community is even smaller. So [that first meeting] was a little bit of a reality check for me in a good way. I thought, "Who are these people? How did I never know?"

PCV: *Thank you. What can an artist collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change?*

JM: The first thing that I really picked up on in the group early on and I still really enjoy is the no authorship portion. That's really special. As artists, we're not built for that. There are so many life lessons built into that practice. You have to have some level of ego to be an artist, if you

want to be an artist that wants to be known or seen. You put your name on things, it's just such a standard practice. We could point to some artists who don't sign their work or who have pen names, or tag names, who choose to conceal their identity somehow. But even that is a little bit different because with the collective whether or not we're working on the same piece, or on our own individual pieces and compiling them within our own group, I think we don't even know or remember who made what. It's cool that we present [the work] to the world as a group. One of my strengths, I think, is whipping up a design or whipping up an image. But then because of my single-parent lifestyle I can't always be there for the screen printing part or the production or the group gathering aspect. So, I contribute by designing what I can. And then I see pictures of everybody else screen printing the designs and it doesn't matter who made what. The work just gets done. That's so cool. The designs are out in the world and there are hundreds of them. The "Reimagine, Resists, Rebuild"²³ t-shirts were one of the things that I put together. It was part of a campaign that we partnered with Aaron Hughes. Aaron wanted to print 500 shirts and hand them out for a huge rally in Chicago for May Day. I actually enjoy the removal of the authorship. The authorship as a group was a fascinating and very enjoyable experience. It made me want to do that more. And it also made me look at not just my own work, but all of our contributions. Beyond artwork, Amanda is so friggin good at everything, her ideas and her organization, and Karen, her key strengths that she brings to the table that keep us going and growing. We probably wouldn't be here if it wasn't for everyone really playing up on the thing that they're the strongest at. So yeah, it's the collective authorship, collective ownership on all levels, artwork and beyond.

²³ You can refer to Figure 6 to see members of The Chicago ACT Collective wearing the t-shirt Jessica designed.

PCV: *I agree. I really do love that we get to really shine in all of our strengths and we can choose when we can contribute and when we need to step back for a little bit. And I think that's a really, really great dynamic that I really appreciate.*

JM: There are different points of entry for participation. I think if we want this group to be healthy and happy we have to make room for people to be human.

PCV: *For me, collective authorship is also important. I think about what we're saying in terms of the ability to kind of step in and out, sometimes it's about honoring rest, wellness, and care for one another. How do you see the collective negotiating the division of tasks or labor as it pertains to the lack of individual authorship?*

JM: I think it's kind of built into our DNA at this point too, you know. We don't break things down by: time is money, money is value. That was something that I struggled with a lot in my past. Questions like, "You're not getting paid, why are you doing it? You have another meeting, for what, are you going to get paid?" Well, no. "Then, why are you doing it?" And I'm like, "Because I want to, because this is what makes me happy, and I believe in these things. And I want to be a part of these things." You get "paid" in ways that aren't monetary. I see that with the group. But I also see that there's this strong work ethic many of us carry and that is a part of the strengths that come through with each person. If you're a very strong writer, if you're a very strong artist, if you're a very strong organizer [everyone's skills are important]. I'm not trying to figure out how to be this thing that I'm not. So, there's a little bit of relief on the labor there. I think in a lot of collectives, there can be this pressure to always be seen, always be producing, always have some sort of focus on the group, on yourselves. And if I remember correctly, we went through some growing pains as well. We've asked ourselves: Who exactly is in the group?

Do we open the group to you know? Are we meeting enough? Too much? What's next? People are moving away, what does this look like now? And it seems because there's such a strong thread of love, friendship, and care those things seem to have resolved themselves. We're friends first. We're people who care about each other first. So, if we have 15 projects this year or if we have three, two, or one, it's okay because we all know that we'll come back to each other because of these different structures and ways of entering in and out of the group. The group chat is such a simple thing but it's a strong glue that I think keeps everyone together. In my opinion, I don't think about labor so much at this point, because I think we all just kind of have an understanding that we're all in this for the right reasons.

PCV: *Your response is a really great segway into the next question because you're talking about love, care, and friendship. My next question is, how can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning? And what does that look like in the collective?*

JM: There's a level of comfort and security which I think is a form of love and care. We're here, we're here together. There were a few times for me, where I really dropped off. Not because of anything to do with the collective. Maybe a little bit of my social anxiety kept me from reaching out. But then, I was reached out to by a few people, they were just, "Are you okay? We haven't heard from you. What's going on?" And I thought "Oh, no, I don't want to jeopardize this." But my absence was met with understanding. I've always struggled with feeling like I fit in, which is related very much to social anxiety. But [that interaction] has taught me that it's okay. Even if I'm uncomfortable, or even if there's a little bit of turbulence, "You're still here with us."

There are so many things and going back to our group chat, sometimes by the time I look down at [my phone] there are 70 messages. I'm sure I miss things. But the fact that there's this

really connected, really wise, really creative, really passionate, caring group of people, that you could just throw something out there, whether it's personal or professional, and then you can, pretty much instantly, get a plethora of answers and advice. It seems that there's been a very strong establishment of what happens in this chat stays in this chat so people can speak freely. People seem to be very honest about their responses.

It's all trust, it's all learning. Some vulnerability definitely had to happen to get us there, we couldn't rush things. And some of that can come from the ego aspect where we're doing this work, we want to be seen, we want to get this kind of credit. But since we don't really operate on that same agenda, there's been a lot of time for the trust and stuff to develop, which makes it stronger, I think.

PCV: *I love that. Thank you. What are the ways in which you see the collective structure allowing for or enabling those relationships, that trust, and that vulnerability to emerge?*

JM: In the beginning, beer and food around Karen, Eric, and Una's²⁴ table. Early on too, just making stuff together. I'm remembering a few people saying, "I'm not exactly an artist," and others saying, "It's okay. Here, come with me, let's do this thing together." And then camping, of course. Camping is definitely a core activity. Even thinking about these collective hoodies and the whole tie dying experience²⁵. The fact that you took all of that time and care to put that together. I think when we were first talking about it I thought, "Oh, tie-dye. Okay, I haven't done that in a long time, but it sounds fun." But then to see your whole process unfold and everything was really fascinating, and I learned a lot. Built within that was you taking the time to put all of

²⁴ Una is Karen and Eric's child.

²⁵ See Figure 21. During the summer of 2021 I lead an ice tie dye workshop for the collective.

that together and Karen making sure we had the space. All of the ordering and organizing that had to happen to even get us there. I'm sure Rudy helped you out a lot with getting everything set. And then the fact that it was extended to our family members. It was very inclusive as far as making sure even if you were out of town, we're still going to take care of you. Even just down to the expression of them, they're so colorful and fun. I still look at my hoodie and find things I haven't noticed before. The hoodie makes me think about that day and the conversations with Nicole's kid. Ricky and Alex²⁶ were there and just everybody who was there together, all the different dynamics of our families coming together. And then it ends with this product. But the end product is such a warm loving reminder. When I put this thing on I'm, "Oh, it's like a hug." And when I see Ricky and Alex or Andre²⁷ choose to wear it for the day, it's such a nice feeling. I think that, at least for right now, the hoodies are symbolic of the trust that has been building for six years. I feel these hoodies and the process we went through to get them are our culminating symbol for right now, of all the shit we've been through together. I think that is reflective of the collective.

PCV: *That's lovely. That's what I was hoping they would be. We're nearing the hour so maybe we can combine the last two questions. I want to be respectful of your time. The questions are, what are the manifestations of being with that extend beyond built communities? And, how do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

JM: I would say anything that you take in, and I think those of us who are practicing artists in the group this is something that maybe we're used to being aware of, but I think it happens to

²⁶ Ricky and Alex are Jessica's children.

²⁷ Andre is Jessica's partner.

everybody, whatever influences are around you can't really keep from seeping into the rest of your life and work. I think that's the very first thing, whatever experiences we're having in the collective, we're taking that into, into our work, into our artwork, into our teaching, into our interpersonal relationships with people around us. I think definitely there are a lot of life lessons and core values that are stressed within the collective that aren't related to making work, you know?

In terms of exclusivity and porosity, I think tension is a good word because I don't know if there's any right or wrong way to do it. I think there has to be a level of exclusivity or some sort of parameters as to who those main players are at first, at least. Because otherwise, things can get kind of convoluted when you have way too many people involved depending on what you're trying to do and the structure of your group. If you even have a structure, if you're starting with no structure, it's very hard to find a structure and be productive when there are too many cooks in the kitchen, and you're trying to be democratic about it. I know, we toyed with that, I remember very early on because I think once people found out, they were, "Oh, what is this? Can I be a part of it? How did you get invited? Can I get invited too?" This is a really natural question. I remember very early on having a conversation and we were trying to figure out how to deal with this. And I'm pretty sure I said this out loud, it was, "Well, I still feel like I don't really know you guys yet that well. And I don't know that you know, me very well." So, it's not, "No, don't invite anyone else in, but give us a chance to establish our own connections and roots before the door is open again." It's not that the doors are closed forever, but give us the time we need first to build trust.

Eric J. García

Figure 12.

The Collective by Eric J. García



Note. Eric J. García, *The Collective*, 2022, digital drawing. Image courtesy of the artist.

Eric J. García (EJG): My name is Eric García and I'm a visual artist. I'm also a part of the Chicago ACT Collective.

Paulina Camacho Valencia (PCV): *You're so many more things than just a visual artist and a member of the ACT collective but you know. You're so modest.*

EJG: I do other things as well.

PCV: *Can you please describe the Chicago ACT Collective? Who makes up the ACT collective? And how do you see yourself within the larger structure of the collective?*

EJG: The Collective is an assortment of artists/activists who were brought together to be part of a superhero super force of artists/activists who work in unison. William Estrada and Sarah Atlas were the two brains behind building the supergroup. I think the beauty of the ACT Collective is that there are so many members with a variety of skills, and anyone can come in and out when needed when there is time to get things done. In the past, we've created zines dealing with the water issues in Chicago. We did art builds for different social movements where people lent their weekends to make banners, posters, and signs. And people come who know how to paint or who know how to build these things or just have a vehicle to take things to sell, who have money to buy food. There are all these different resources that the collective is able to provide to not only create something within the group but to support other groups as well. And so, we do a variety of stuff. Aside from that, we all know each other from different circles. I didn't know some of the members of the ACT Collective prior and have gotten to know them through the collective. It's become not only a collective that creates or does actions but also has become a support group. We do a lot of camping which has been really nice, it takes us out of the work zone and just has

us playing, just has us communing, sharing a meal together. Camping enables us to recharge and to regroup and think differently and to have different conversations outside of work. I think that's what the ACT Collective is.

PCV: *We are pretty rad. In your experience working through and with collectives, what can an artist collective, and here I'm speaking about the Chicago ACT Collective specifically, teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change?*

EJG: I think the collective disrupts the idea of the individual or individualism by showing and demonstrating the possibilities of working in a group. We have all these different superpowers and when they come together they can harness all that different energy to create bigger things that an individual would not be able to do alone. Aside from the ACT collective, I know personally as an individual artist, I need help sometimes to make bigger projects possible. A good example is when I'm creating murals. I can't possibly physically create a giant, large-scale mural by myself, I need a team. I need help. And when you have others involved, it makes the work not only easier but possible because you have that extra help. And then it's even better when you bring in people that have skills that you do not have and they make the work even better. And that's what the collective does. I was really lucky to be a mentee for a muralist who understood community work. Joe Stevenson was a master muralist who I worked under when I was a teen. He taught me that you can't get this done by yourself, you need the help of others. And it's not only the people that're painting beside you, but it's also the people that bring the scaffolding, it's also the people that could possibly bring you lunch to keep going for the day, it's also the community that offers input about what to paint. So, I was lucky to understand that teamwork is a part of a normal artistic professional practice. This idea of the lone artists in the

studio by themselves working day in and day out in a cave with no other interaction, just for the solo show, at the end is not the only route that is possible. And I do understand that way of working. I think there are certain points in my life, or there are certain times of the year, where that's all I do. I am in the cave by myself working. But I acknowledged that there are other points where there are other things that I want to create that I need help with. Or there are other times in my life, where there's other people that need help, and I can help them. And I think both ways of working have their own value.

For the collective, I think the water zine is a good example. There were many hands that touched that project. Many people contributed different illustrations to the zine while other people wrote different articles. Other people edited those different articles, different people designed and put together the format for the zine, how it was going to be structured. And then there were the people who actually printed it and made it into a physical copy. And then there were teams that actually distributed it and another team that put it in an exhibition. So the zine was presented in different places in different formats. So, there were all of these different possibilities with this one simple zine that was designed by many different people. And it was put to use in many different locations whereas one person could not possibly have done so much stuff with it.

PCV: *Thank you. My next question is, how can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning?*

EJG: A few years ago someone asked me about love in my practice and how does love motivate me in what I do because I work with social activism within my work. And I remember blowing off that question and saying, "I don't have an answer for you." I refused to answer. I said, "I'm

gonna skip this because I had never thought about love being a part of my practice.” My immediate answer was going to be like, “It doesn't.” Frustration and hate are the motivation for what I do because I get so mad that I want to put something out in reaction to it. But then later on thinking about that question, I thought, “Well, love does take a role because the reason why I am so mad and frustrated is because I feel empathetic to others, right?” I'm so frustrated and I'm mad because someone else is being wronged, or injustice is being employed, or someone is hurting. I have empathy for them. So, I guess that's the love that's really motivating me.

PCV: *And what are some of the things that make you angry? What are the things that fuel your empathy or that fuel your rage, that remind you about this empathy towards others?*

EJG: It's everything. Just turned on the local news and I'm just outraged by everything that's going on. It's just disgusting to me, and I'm constantly listening to the news. So I'm constantly pissed off all day long looking for new ways to burn down the system. It's a never-ending madness: the environment, the local government, the bigger government, the hypocrisy that's going around. It's just everything.

PCV: *I'm kind of giggling at the fact that, I think for both of us, I think even just for me, really, the notion of even focusing so much of this work on love felt new and unfamiliar. If I'd asked myself four years ago what I thought about love, I would probably have said, “It's cool and it's cute and everything, but it ain't shit.” But the more I think about it I've been really changing my own orientation and understanding about the power of love in the world. And so the next question, I'm asking what are the manifestations of being with that extend beyond built communities?*

EJG: I can tell you, Cortés, my wife, she really takes to heart the ACT Collective and how we interact. She is constantly referencing the dynamics of how we come to consensus, or work on projects, or interact and function as a group. She's constantly reminded of that when she goes into other settings with other groups. I know for a fact she's always bringing in these lessons that she's learning from the ACT Collective and how we function into other settings. I feel that she's more interactive or more engaged with the ACT collective than I am.

PCV: *Are there ways that ACT Collective shapes and informs other facets of your life and work? Do you think that there are ways in which the collective values and ways of being together then seep into the values of your own nuclear home unit or other life spaces?*

EJG: Oh, yeah. In watching different members, and how their family functions, watching different parents and seeing what they're doing. I think [at home] we're constantly talking about other members. Not in a bad way, just saying like, "Oh, this is how they parent. This is something that we could model and maybe use in our family." Or even talking with those family members and asking them, how do you deal with this parenting problem? So, those are, I guess, more intimate relations and interactions. I think I would even go as far as to say that we're more of a friends collective. A collective of personalities who want to hang out with and be round each other versus a collective that is actually making art and stuff. We do that as well, but I think we weigh heavier and more as a community of friends. Like a support network.

PCV: *Agreed, and the last question is, how do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

EJG: There are so many people involved in the collective, I think it's very open. It seems like we're still gathering people. From what I understand, there are no bylaws that restrict people from coming in. There was never any constitution or document made that allows people to be in and out. If we want people to come in, how do we bring them in? There's no set rule. So it's still very amorphous how the ACT collective grows. And sometimes it does grow, and sometimes does shrink. Sometimes we all come together and we have a big team. And sometimes not everyone has time to come together. And sometimes we break off into smaller groups and do things. And then sometimes those smaller groups do things with other organizations, which enables the collective to in some way expand into another neighborhoods or to other communities. I guess from an outsider looking in, you could say, "That's the ACT Collective and those are the 15 members and they're a solid group. How do I get in, is there a membership? Who do I ask to be a part of the group, will they let me in?" I can see from the outside looking in it could seem that way. It comes down to perspective, if you're looking at it from inside out, or vice versa. Looking at it from a larger institution that needs help, then the collective can come in and be part of a bigger group. Or the collective can seem like a small group, nationally, but within communities in Chicago it can seem like a larger group.

I think there's a power, a refuge, that closed-off collectives can offer members. Sometimes that can be a positive when you know you trust this band of people that you can speak freely with, that you could come to with a question, that you could come to with to bare your soul, you know. Those spaces are needed and sometimes you can't talk or you can't express yourself in other spaces where you don't feel comfortable. And it can seem very exclusive but sometimes you just need a safe space with like-minded people to be able to speak freely.

Juan-Carlos Pérez

Figure 13.

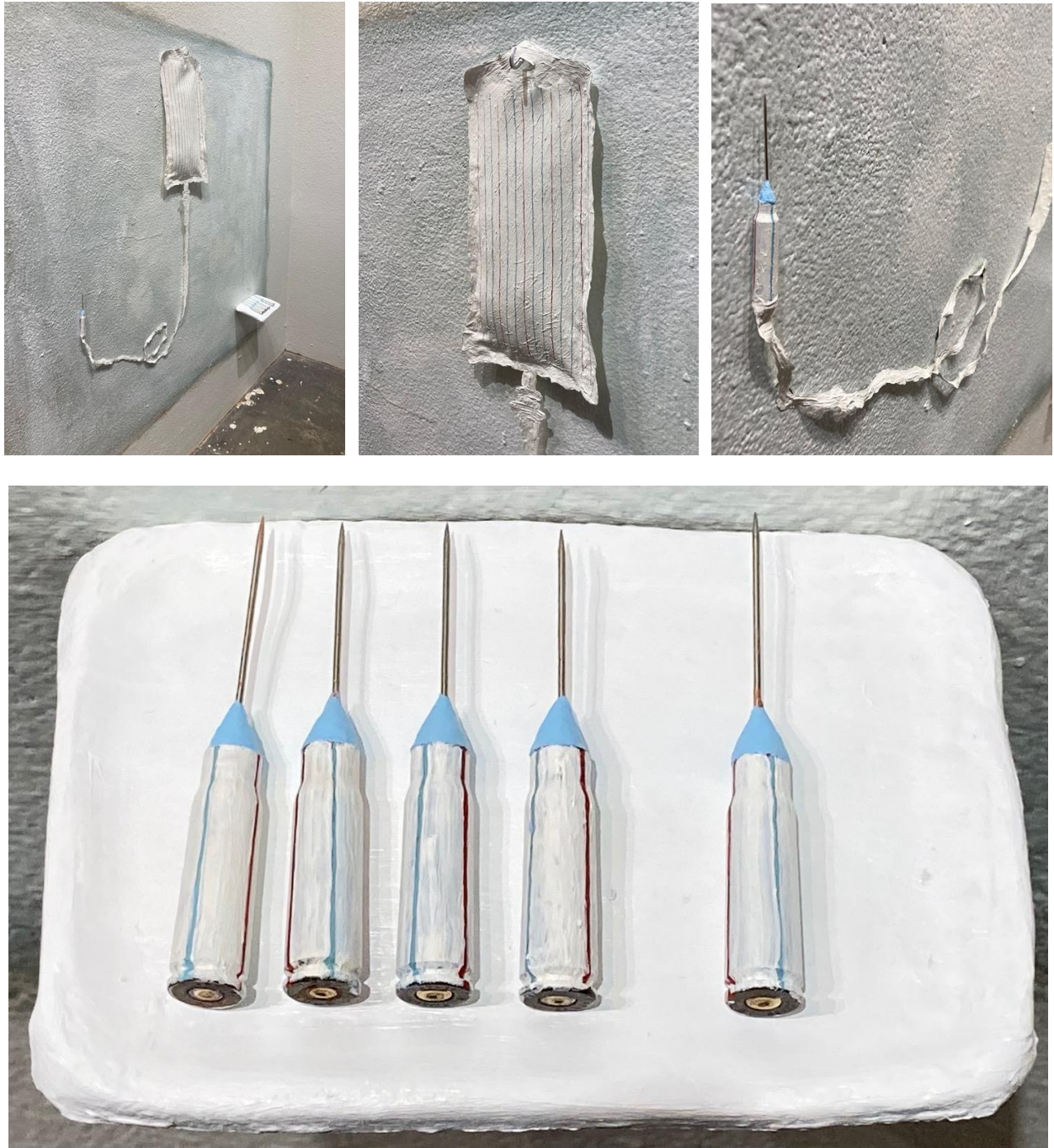
Ivy Bag by Juan-Carlos Pérez



Note. Juan-Carlos Pérez, *Ivy Bag*, Installation, 2021, 3 x 3.5 ft., acrylic, clay, needles. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 14.

Details of Ivy Bag by Juan-Carlos Pérez



Note. Juan-Carlos Pérez, *Ivy Bag*, Installation (details), 2021, 3 x 3.5 ft., acrylic, clay, needles. Image courtesy of the artist.

Juan-Carlos shared:

In *Ivy Bag*, I wanted to create an environment where the unknown exists in the familiar. Where trust is not complete. Spaces that carry intensity, fear & doubt. How do environments play a role in how cultural identity is infused to us since the day we are born? How much does the introduction of ideas, perspectives, emotional connection by our environment shape how we view ourselves, others, our place, or identity in society? (Pérez, personal communication, 2022)

Juan-Carlos Pérez (JCP): My name is Juan-Carlos Pérez. I'm an artist, arts educator, coordinator, cultural worker, and arts activist. I teach rigorous arts education throughout the country, this includes arts integration, community arts, and large-scale mural work painted and mosaics.

Paulina Camacho Valencia (PCV): *And you're also a member of the Chicago ACT Collective, can you describe the ACT Collective?*

JCP: The Chicago Act Collective is a family made up of artists, educators, activists, community members, legal workers, and children advocates. We came together to create social responses through art workshops or projects for communities. We take the opportunity to create dialogue with the community using our art-making process. We use art as a medium to break through difficult conversations, whether it's regarding labor practices, economic practices, racial inequalities, educational, or even immigration inequalities.

PCV: *How do you see yourself within the structure of the collective?*

JCP: As artists and educational community workers, we frequently engage in dialogue you normally can't have out in public or outside of your comfort zone out of fear of being judged because these are conversations that do not really exist out in public view. The topics and opinions are not mainstream or trendy opinions and could be harshly criticized if you don't have a polished observation or expression. I think because of those different conversations that we've always had in the neighborhood I got an invitation from Sarah and William to come to the information meeting. I can't speak for Sarah and William, but I think one of their main intentions was to gather a group of people that had different perspectives and weren't exactly the same.

Folks that could bring a different, investigative, social curiosity to a dialogue. Relationship building, trust, and safe spaces are important parts of engaging in dialogue. I think how I automatically came into this project or was drawn to it, was because there was already a trusted and safe space that had already been built between Sara, William, and me (and some other people there that we knew). I am in the practice of neighborhood observation, so during the information meeting, when everyone started talking about different things, I was watching. I really appreciated the authenticity. I think that's what brought me back to the second meeting. From then on, that dialogue started tightening up a little more. We all came in being vulnerable in order to create a safe space and friendship as we learned through life and create a form of family. There's strength when you can actually put yourself in a place of vulnerability and honesty. We all listened to each other and we all responded to one another. I think the collective has always been open and accepting of everyone. I found community and my place in the collective as an artist.

PCV: *In your opinion, what can an artist collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change?*

JCP: That social change can happen:

- By taking power, dominating factors, or control from those whose focus is a singular authority or self-interest such as economic, environmental, psychological, colonial hierarchy, and redirect or redistribute that power equally amongst the community – whether it's through labor, health, wages, housing, education, etc.

- By finding a supportive environment to investigate healthy dialogues, that equal intellectual stimulation to be able to decipher themes and concepts that lead to in-depth self-investigation, growth, and maturity.
- Through the exchange of life experiences
- By finding community to inspire and explore healthy, mature, productive methods of response – specific to the culture of the neighborhood – that can bring immediate but most importantly long-term results.
- By centering human engagement and equal value. In other words, every role or function is valuable.

These ideas teach us that we, the community, can attain or gain access to resources so we can be our own advocates. It teaches us that we can harness inner strength, ancestral strength, communal strength, all things that we consider foundational strength to enact social change. We can also harness power by not just looking at academic education, but instead looking at the education that comes through our experience and generational experiences. I was always learning from the community. That's where I learned why I am valuable and who, ancestrally, has fought for me to continue to exist today. My being here, in this country, and being alive now is due to the work of a lot of people who have come before me. I have always pulled strength from that.

PCV: *Maybe this leads to my next question, how can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning?*

JCP: I'm thinking a lot about growing up in Pasadena, CA. A lot of the elders in the Black community took on the responsibility to always find an opportunity to show us they cared, to

educate us kids. Whether it was like, “You're not gonna get into any trouble, you know better.”

Or riding my bike with a group of kids and they would pull us aside to talk to us. Having people

I didn't know show concern and create loving experiences in community was an education.

There are certain things I take from that experience that reminds me that it's important to care for the whole individual. The elders modeled a culture of care comprised of listening and a desire to understand. These experiences can be passed on creating a culture of acceptance. It's creating a culture of listening, honesty, and authenticity. What I mean by authenticity is hard truths, which we can learn through and from experience. Those hard truths lead to dialogue. Sometimes people want to give up on the dialogue because, where is it going to take us? It can feel like we're going in circles. But it's important to continue facing those harsh truths and keep having conversations.

PCV: *The next question is a little bit of a pivot, what are the manifestations of being with that extend beyond built communities? What are the things that maybe we learn from our collective that then get expanded out perhaps into other spaces, communities, and interactions with others?*

JCP: We began to create these opportunities to engage in dialogue with the rest of the community by using art as a medium to be able to do so. Those conversations ended up leading to further explorations for projects that we never thought could happen. Other manifestations include coming up with our own systems of historical or cultural mapping. By doing that work we're archiving. We document the experiences and the existence of people and communities within a specific time and era. These archives can help resist the appropriation or erasure of the community's own truth and history. We are a vehicle for archiving and documentation of our existence. We have found strength in being vocal and writing – like what you're doing right now

– so that we will not be excluded from historical narratives. So that future communities can find those archives and understand that we were building and we are part of a longer genealogy. We only are able to function because we exist in the steps or in the shadows of other people who have come before and laid the foundation so that we can do this work.

PCV: *This is awesome. How do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

JCP: We've been together as a collective for six years. We came in through curiosity and uncertainty and we have created a safe space for us to engage with each other and the community. It's good to be in a place where we've created this culture where we have these honest dialogues. So, let's start looking at this idea of how we also include other artists or other community members. At first, we got as many people as we could who were interested and then over time, we created the space. I remember that there was a lot of feedback about the work that we're doing from all of these communities saying, "It's amazing. Can we become part of the collective?" But we were still vulnerable, we needed time to shape this group. We were just barely starting to create trust amongst ourselves. I think one of the most amazing things that has happened in the past 10 years is the rise of different collectives. It's not new, different groups of individuals, through different lenses, approaching social activism through many different mediums, not just art. I think what we've learned is that we can come together and be receptive to each other and offer support. This can add to the longevity and sustainability of community. It becomes part of that inner strength, that foundational strength, that you can pull from later as needed. We don't have to fit a mainstream social activism pattern. Our lives are full of layers. Some things don't have immediate answers, but we can have continued dialogue and return to

similar questions. That's the beauty of what I've seen happening in the collective and in other groups.

Eric Reyes

Figure 15.

Chicago ACT Collective Hiking in the Shawnee National Forest



Note. Photograph of members of the Chicago ACT Collective and friends hiking in the Shawnee National Forest, 2020. Image included with the permission of Paulina Camacho Valencia.

Eric Reyes (ER): My name is Eric Reyes, I am a member of the Chicago ACT Collective, an education advocate and activist in Chicago, and a public sector employee of the city of Chicago.

Paulina Camacho Valencia (PCV): *Can you tell me a little bit about the ACT Collective?*

ER: It's a rad group of artists, activists, parents, teachers, and students, that are working towards the same ideas – social justice, immigrants rights, prison abolition. It's always great to know that other people are doing things that you either admire or agree with, or agree with your ideas, or are just doing things that are inspiring. From there, we've taught each other how to take care of ourselves in this work. A lot of us have been doing this work for a long time, either teaching or activism work, and many of us needed a community, to keep us inspired and keep us going.

PCV: *And then how would you describe yourself within the context of the group?*

ER: I bring education activism to the group. That's my background, as a Chicago public school parent and graduate. In my activism work, I analyze education systems and education quality. This is really great because a lot of the folks who are connected to public schools have similar analyses and similar critiques of large systems like that. It allows me to engage on a deeper level with people within that system and people who bring different viewpoints. I do love art, I'm a musician and I have a background in sound. So that's also another thing I bring to the group. I'm also the son of Filipino immigrants. I bring to the group that unique perspective of growing up in essentially downtown Chicago.

PCV: *I love this question because everyone is just so humble and so modest about y'all's brilliance.*

ER: I was thinking about all of your questions in a bigger context. I have this special power because I've known my partner, Karen, for so long. We bring that combination in partnership to the group. I think it makes me more confident. We also check each other regularly to make sure that we're getting to the crux of everything that we do; to make sure we get to the main point and we're not bullshitting. And we hold each other up and accountable. We also learned from all the other great combinations within the team.

PCV: *Definitely, I see y'all. In your opinion, what can an artist collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change?*

ER: Within this group, I get to shut off the part of my brain that's the son of Filipino immigrants who came here to make sure that I was successful, and that they were successful. There's this grind and hustle mentality that's always right here, behind me, you know. In this group, I get to step away from that pressure, that individualism. I have the freedom and joy to be creative, to take risks, in a safe environment with people who care about me and care about what I put out. And when you get that safety, that love, that warmth, that community, it turns into bravery and power. In community the barrier and weight is lifted, and then you're able to just push with your true essence, like, what is like really in your heart. I'll say that as a brown man in America [the collective] is a space that allows me to be vulnerable. That's social change with small letters rather than massive social change. I'm doing the change through the group for myself and it's modeled by some of the other folks in the group.

PCV: *Super important. Maybe this transitions into my next question since we're thinking about spaces of vulnerability. My question is, how can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning?*

ER: To receive that communal learning one has to understand that everybody has expertise from their individual experiences. I [realized I] didn't have to chase this idea or notion of success that actually has intentional barriers for me to get there. There are barriers around money, language, and all types of stuff. [The awareness that] it's all bullshit is such a relief. I began to see things that I already knew, there's genius in everyone, in loving and caring for everyone. There are bad situations everywhere, all of these things impact how we deal with ourselves, but also deal with other people in the community. To remove ego and then realize one can always learn from other people from everybody was a very clicking moment for me. I see it all the time with William, he's interested in other people's perspectives. He's genuinely curious about their experience, their viewpoint from their experience. I love it. I see a ton of other people in the collective model this too. And I'm just like, "Oh, that comes from years and years of experience." And for me, it was years and years of learning. And then years and years of understanding how systems work and how my ego is getting in the way of allowing me to take care about myself.

PCV: *I love that. For those who are not already attuned to love's generative possibilities, how do we begin to attune ourselves to engaging love as a catalyst?*

ER: Camping is something that Karen and I have in common from our youth that other people within the group also practice & enjoy. We demonstrated to others how fulfilling that could be. And then they became receptive to it because we told them they would be safe. We ensured them that we'll have equipment for you, we'll make sure we don't do anything too crazy and that it's

chill and relaxing, and that we will get all this great knowledge and time off and time to process. I love that [camping] is built into how we do things. Even how that can [offer] people some relief from that constant grind that's on our backs. I think that's awesome. If it's not [camping and rest] we're always communicating. Even if you're not participating, we have that communication. I know I've got 14 People at my fingertips or on a Zoom call or ready to go on a bike ride, or go camping, or make art.

PCV: *That's so important, meeting people at their comfort level. The next question is, what are the manifestations of being with that extend beyond built communities? I'm thinking about this question along two different but similar lines, the first is, can we map the network of constellated relationships that have predated the formation of the collective, have been built through the collective, and extend beyond the collective? And second, what are the lessons that have surged within the collective that can be applied beyond the collective to other group configurations?*

ER: Let's make a map, a plot map. For me, all of this starts when Karen and I moved back to Chicago. We meet you at the BBF²⁸ and we met Hilesh while he was working at CAPE.²⁹ When it was time for Una to go to kindergarten, Karen and I already had this analysis of what counts as quality and what counts as good in schools. We were talking to all of our connections and were connected to Tamara.³⁰ She was like, "Yeah, we'd love to have you. But this is what we're about, you're not gonna be here chasing test scores, you're not gonna be here trying to improve the

²⁸ BBF is the acronym for the Better Boys Foundation (n. d.). They are a non-profit community based organization on the west side of Chicago.

²⁹ CAPE stands for Chicago Arts Partnership in Education (n. d.). Many members of the Chicago ACT Collective have worked for this non-profit organization over the years. One feature that distinguishes this organization from other arts-integration organizations is that CAPE's model is predicated on long-term sustained partnerships with schools.

³⁰ Tamara Witzl is the principal at Telpochcalli School located in the Little Village neighborhood located on the near-west side of Chicago.

community.” So it was a learning experience in community but also negotiating toxic community relationships and how to not come in like a colonizer. Or how to authentically be part of a community.

PCV: *I love that you mentioned that. What I hear you saying too, is the importance of responsibility and reciprocity to the space and the people who make up the communities you are entering.*

ER: It’s not like Karen and I are amazing because this is how we entered that space. We have some academic knowledge about how these things play out but then were able to learn the practice through our circles, our networks, and our friends.

PCV: *You're helping me to clarify that this question is both tracing the connections of how we came to know one another, and also what are the lessons that apply both in and outside of the collective that helped to build, fuel, and sustain really rad community spaces?*

ER: Yeah, it's both lessons and practice. It allows me to dream. I always want to push because I'm just like, “How crazy can this collective get? Let's see what else can we do? How else can we push? How can we get the most out of our lives and get the most for each other and for the community?” Everybody is kind of in the dream [realm] which is the moment of creativity. When you feel safe, when you feel like everything's aligned, you can think about what's next. Which I realized for myself can be a privilege.

PCV: *It totally is. I love this so much. The way you're bringing up trust and safety is so important.*

ER: Yeah, that's my shit. I've been like formulating how that all connects in my work with young people. It's that idea when everything is right and everything is safe, when everybody is caring about you, when everybody has your back that's the moment for something big, change, creativity, fun. Feeling.

PCV: *Yes to all of that. I'm going to pivot a little bit, I think the other side of collectives and community structures is that sometimes they are perceived as these closed-off entities, how do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

ER: It almost reminds me of high school. Karen and I were part of a group, it wasn't like a popularity thing. It's just that our group was open and welcoming, it became nebulous. Maybe one day you ate lunch with us, maybe you didn't. But you were not a friend because you didn't, you know. That's what I like about the collective, too. It's really hardcore and intense, but also nebulous. There are all of these other people that y'all know that I don't know and things that I've been introduced to, and artists, and I love chatting with Amanda about city politics. It always blows my mind because she has a really deep understanding of how that stuff works.

Then when we think about the collective, I don't think it's in our nature to be exclusive. But it's hard to catch somebody up to six years of really intense, communal thinking and whatever we do sparring, ideation, all of that vulnerability, caring, drinking. All of that. It's hard. I think, at one point, we have all thought, "Oh, we could invite someone. And it would be complicated but if any crew can do it, we can do it." So there's this weird exclusivity that we never intended but we all just got together and ran with it. And we ran with it fast and cohesively.

PCV: *I really love the explanation of the nebulous formation or structure of our group. And I think a lot of that is reflective of how people get to come in and step away whenever necessary. While there are others who perhaps are not official members are still homies that are, perhaps not officially, part of the collective but are friends and allies and people that we turned to often for things. And so, I think that there's something here too.*

ER: I can't wait to be able to gather with people again, you know, because, at some point, we'll need to do some more artmaking, just chopping it up about ideas and next steps and next things to learn. I know there are a lot of dreams in this group.

Sarah Atlas

Figure 16.

Aspen Collective by Sarah Atlas



Note. Sarah Atlas, *Aspen Collective*, 2021, pen and paper, 8.5 x 11. Image curtesy of the artist.

Sarah included the following statement:

An aspen tree is actually only a small part of a larger organism. These trees are considered a singular organism with the main life force in their extensive, interconnected root structures that extends far and wide. The root systems have the capacity to lie dormant for many years until the conditions are right to sprout new trees, including the need for abundant sunshine to grow. Aspens also grow all the time in various climates, throughout winter and across North America. If you overlay a map of the United States on this drawing, aspen trees appear in the various current locations of the ACT Collective members. We launched in the cold winter of Chicago and continued to grow as artists, as individuals, as families, as a collective. We have spread out location wise but our roots are strong and interconnected and we maintain a strong organism together. (Atlas, personal communication, 2022)

Sarah Atlas (SA): I'm Sarah Atlas. I think one of the first and most important ways I identify is as a mother. I feel like I'm a mother in many ways because I have two kids, and one as a stepmother. I really feel like that's a huge part of my identity, as a parent in the world, and thinking about raising particularly male-identified children in the world. I'm a student, I went back to school at a later point in my career. It's an interesting way to think about myself, to be a student again in a formal setting. I think of myself as a student in general, but I'm a formal student right now. I no longer work directly in education, but I do identify as an educator. I've never been a classroom teacher, but I have done a lot of teaching in various settings. I think of myself as an educator even though that's not specifically what I do right now.

Paulina Camacho Valencia (PCV): *Let's get into the collective, can you describe the Chicago ACT Collective?*

SA: Well, the collective is a magical unicorn, so let's just start there. The Chicago ACT Collective is a group of really deeply committed amazing people, artists, thinkers, and educators who work together to imagine new worlds and try to put work into the worlds that try to enact that vision and relate to each other in a way that tries to enact that vision.

PCV: *How do you see yourself within the larger structure of the collective?*

SA: I think I've really struggled with my role in the collective actually. When William and I co-founded this, I had a very specific vision. Not that I was tied to that [idea]. But when we first applied for the grant,³¹ I had a very specific idea of what I was trying to start. And it is 100% not

³¹ Sarah and William applied for and received a grant through the Propeller Found (n. d.) to help establish the Chicago ACT Collective.

that. Not 100%, but maybe like, 70%, not that. And so, the transformation of [the collective] has been really beautiful to see and really interesting, but also has left me wondering, what is my role? I think I lost the capacity to feel like I could sort of drive things. I really appreciated the collective drive of things. But when you're co-founding something, you're the one doing a lot of the scheduling and communication upfront, and I definitely have not played that role in the last few years. I think what's really lovely is that the collective can grow and change, and people can step up and step back at different times in their lives, depending on what's going on. And we've been together long enough that we can see that in each other, you know. But I don't feel like I actually have a specific answer to that. The collective has 100% evolved into this beautiful group of people who, I think, still care about using art to support action. Sometimes more immediate action, but that actually isn't the crux of what we do. We're not a band of printmakers who show up on the streets and that's okay. It's become this whole other thing that is actually more profound. I couldn't have even conceived of that, at the beginning.

PCV: *I'm wondering what enabled the transformation?*

SA: I think it was the people we invited and that the fact that we, I mean, William and I, are not very prescriptive people. We weren't gonna come in and be like, "No, this is the mission and the goal. And this is what we do. And this is how it's done." That's not who we are. It was sort of like, here's a vision of like, let's bring some artists together. But I think it was the people. We could have gotten together a different group of people and the collective would have been something different and would have evolved into something different. I think it's this group of people and our way of working together and who each person is and the ideas people have. Everything is shaped by the relationships and the people.

PCV: *So, speaking of the people that make up this collective, we can maybe jump into the first question, what can an artist collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change?*

SA: One kind of very practical logistical thing, I remember a conversation very early on where we [discussed] if we make something as a collective, does the person who ended up doing the making sign their name or do we sign our collective name? Do we want to be a collective of individuals, which we are, or is the idea to make artwork as a collective? If you're an artist making something as a [part of the] collective, do, we just put our collective name? We had a long discussion about it. We went with [the decision to] sign as a collective and we got ourselves a little stamp we put on all of our posters. I don't recall in that conversation talking about this as a way to disrupt individualism and harness the power of community for social change. But I actually think even those seemingly sort of small choices of how to present ourselves in the world and how to be in the world are actually doing that. I think that was actually a choice that was about disrupting individualism. I really appreciate that, because I think it can also be hard, as an artist, when you make stuff to see it in the world and not have your name on it. Because we're proud of what we make and things like that, but also really proud that we're part of a collective that's in the world.

There's also been such a way that we have loved each other's children, and pets, and families that has been really, really magical. I was nursing during meetings and would then just pass the baby around. And we make sure that the kids are included in everything. And we know when each other's families get sick. There's just a way that we are with each other's families and particularly, I think, with children, that is just really, really, really beautiful to me, and really

meaningful. Una will talk about how she misses the collective and Atticus³² is like, “When are we going camping with the collective?” There's such a sense of belonging that extends to our families. I think that that's really another way to disrupt individualism and I think that's really powerful community building. I think it is about social change, how we want to raise families, and how we want to care for each other is, I think, a huge part of what we do.

PCV: *I love that. I think that both of your examples echo similar ideas. I think what both of these things are demonstrating is that as people, we can't be silos because we can't survive on our own. I hear you pointing to these necessary moments of relational dependence and mutual support and aid that create the conditions that really kind of offer support and community to be able to then manifest social change. That's rad. And the next question, and it may be building from the previous example is, how can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning?*

SA: A couple of days ago, I was reading a blog post by Fatimah Asghar,³³ she was talking about her poetry collective, Dark Noise, she described it as a project in loving. I was like, “I love that so much.” Just that phrase, “We are a project in loving.” I was like, “I'm using that when I talk with Pau in two days.” It's not my phrase, I can't claim it but I was like, “That is what the ACT collective is, we are a project in loving.” What I love about that example is that love is active. Loving is a process and it's active. It also references a lot of the *Emergent Strategy*³⁴ ideas we talked about early on. Looking back to adrienne maree brown³⁵ relationships are everything. It

³² Atticus is Sarah and Hilesh's oldest son.

³³ Asghar, 2022.

³⁴ brown, 2017.

³⁵ brown, 2017.

just took me, I think, a long time to really, really understand that. If we really have that love for each other, we can call each other in, we can support each other, we can be there for one another, we can teach and learn together, we can admit when we don't know something. It creates a sort of safety. Not in a “let's play it safe” way but it creates the safety for the kind of teaching and learning that I think we want, that stems from the way we love each other.

PCV: *You're the second person that brings up the notion of safety, I'm curious, how do we cultivate an environment that enables this feeling of safety? How do you see this working in the collective?*

SA: I think part of it is building trust. I think trust and relationships and love are a web. They're so intertwined and dependent on each other. Without trust, there isn't a safe space. Without the trust in each other and the relationships we've built together you can't have the safe space to share that vulnerability.

PCV: *Makes total sense, the interplay between trust, love, and relationships as instrumental in developing and generating this notion of safety and brave space. We feel safe enough to be held and also challenged. There is enough respect and love be like, “Hey, we were here for you. And, maybe that's not such a great idea...”*

SA: Or like, “I'm having a really hard time with my family and I just need you all to know. Anyone have advice?” Space to deal with just all of it, you know. I'm glad you just use that phrase, brave space. I read something a while ago that left me wondering, is there ever really a safe space? Is that actually what we want? Or do we want brave spaces? I was like, “Yep. We want brave spaces.”

PCV: *I was introduced to the idea by a friend, June Kuoch,³⁶ and it resonated profoundly. I was left thinking, who is safety for, who feels safe, who doesn't? And the next question is, what are the manifestations of being with an extended beyond built communities? With this question, I'm thinking about what are the things that we are cultivating within the collective that perhaps, bleed out and branch out and extend outside of the collective?*

SA: I think a lot about the idea of showing up. What does it mean, to show up for other people? What does it mean in terms of how you show up? What does it mean to be present? It's important to show up and sometimes that's physically, we physically need to go there and be in community with people. Or I actually really need to be present for this, or I need to put my phone away and hang out with my kids. There are so many ways to think about how we show up in the world. I think the collective has really shown me what it means to show up for each other. I have really thought about that in a lot of other areas of my life. I don't just mean that as a physical showing up way, sometimes that's really important, but sometimes it's about how we are with each other.

PCV: *I think that that's amazing. How do we cultivate everything else if we're not present? And how are we present? If we're talking about all these other things being important and wanting to develop them the first step is we need to be there.*

SA: For us, a lot of that is the text thread. We're disparate and people have moved, and we've figured out a way to have that not be the end of somebody's participation or part of the collective. We will do all the things we can for all of us to stay together. I think that's another

³⁶ June Kuoch, personal communication, 2019.

sort of quote, unquote, lesson, or manifestation if you will. What is the labor put into ensuring that we are still together? And sometimes that is a text thread.

PCV: *To wrap up, how do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

SA: I absolutely hear what you are saying about the exclusivity, but I also think within us we've done a really good job, and I feel like it's been pretty organic, of being porous in terms of the roles we play, the work we do. Sometimes people are really active even on the text thread, and some people are a lot quieter. Then there are moments of being like, "Hey, I've got more capacity." I just wanted to also name that that exists not in any sort of defense but it's interesting to me that we have created a structure where that's possible. I love that about us.

One of the things about exclusivity, I think is very real, that we've talked about a couple of times before is how it would be really hard to add new members. How do you add new people into this family we've created, even though we believe in extended family and relationships? Do they have to come camping with us? Do we have to onboard them and be like, "Okay, so Hilesh is our resident sexy poet, and here's why. And here are all the inside jokes. Here is where everybody lives and how people can relate to each other." How does that even work? How would we do that with intention and care? I have more questions than answers to this one.

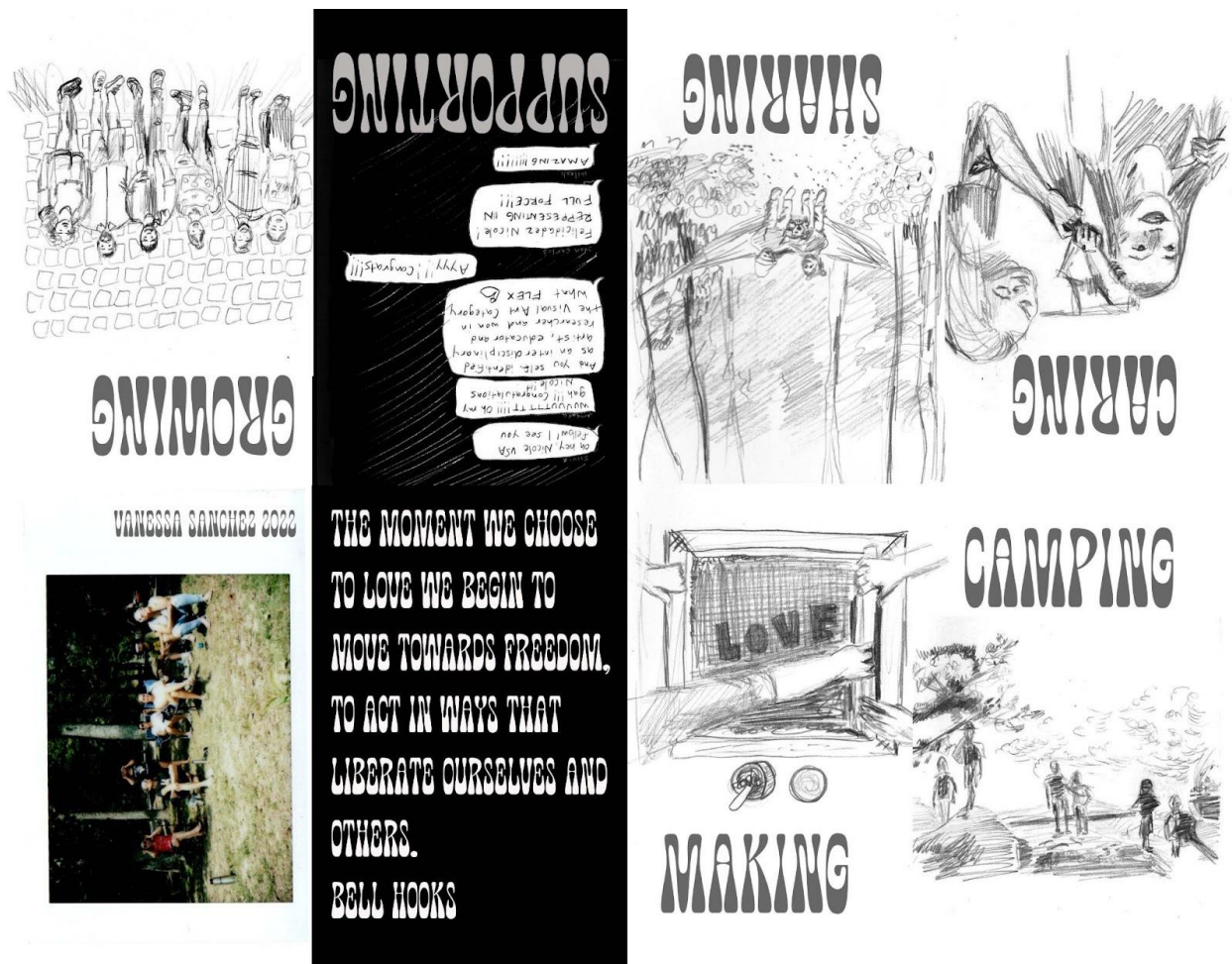
And maybe I'd be curious to think about what exclusivity really means. If we decide not to add new members does that just mean we're exclusive? What if we put in enormous amounts of effort to partnerships and collaborations and sharing resources and redistributing resources? What are other ways that we can push against that? It doesn't have to just mean that we add new people. I'm not saying that we wouldn't, I'm just thinking we have such a wealth of knowledge

and resources among us and lots of different kinds of ways to address this. What are the ways we push ourselves to really share that? That's another way to push against exclusivity.

Vanessa Ann Sanchez

Figure 17.

ACT Zine by Vanessa Ann Sanchez



Note. Vanessa Ann Sanchez, *ACT Zine*, 2022, digital drawing. Image courtesy of artist.

Vanessa Ann Sanchez (VAS): I'm Vanessa Sanchez, pronouns she/her/hers. I'm an artist, a mama, and a friend. I work for the National Museum of Mexican Art and run their two education departments, the main education department and their teen program, Yollocalli. I'm a part of the Chicago ACT Collective, a part of the Instituto Gráfico de Chicago collective, and I'm a board member and one of the leaders of Villapalooza, the Little Village music festival.

Paulina Camacho Valencia (PCV): *Everyone is super modest and so humble. Can you do me a favor and describe the Chicago ACT Collective?*

VAS: The Chicago ACT Collective is a group of rad friendly people who pretty much all work within the arts, education, or community work fields. We get together to be a resource for each other, number one, and to help make change within our own communities or with our own causes. As a collective, we also work together to help other collectives or other groups who need support with artwork, design work, or just some brainpower work on helping better communities and helping make Chicago better.

PCV: *Thank you. Even though we have a very amorphous kind of structure, how do you see yourself situated within the collective?*

VAS: I love that the collective is this group of friends who take on different projects when we can because we all are so busy and have so many different responsibilities. When people can do some work to help others in other communities or other networks then some people take that work on, and some people don't. But we're also really good at resource knowledge sharing too. Our group text is probably a book in itself. There's no structure. I guess you could even call it a club, you know. There's this group of people and somebody gets a ping from the outside world

that they need the ACT Collective's help. We are like Care Bears,³⁷ we come on through and work out who's the best person to help, who has time to help, and the mental capacity to help, and we go from there. And then we all care for each other too, which is great.

PCV: *I love that, the Care Bears analogy is really sweet. So my first question is, what can an artist collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change?*

VAS: I think as an artist sometimes you can get stuck in this hole of feeling like you're doing things on your own, making the work. But as a human, that's not how I function in this world. I've always been a person that felt like I had to care for my community or had to care for the people around me, care for making sure that there was equity or social justice in this world. That's not work you can do alone or should do alone. The collective is about finding people that you want to trust and build new ideas, building new ways of making those ideas work, and sharing out what we all learn together.

PCV: *I love that. Where do you think this impetus for care for your community and for people around you, with a focus on equity and social justice, comes from?*

VAS: It was definitely a mix of things and having a really great mom who modeled care. Growing up you always hear in a lot of school settings or from adults, “Well, you have to give back. You have to always give back to the next generation. You have to always give back to your

³⁷ Reference to the popular illustrated characters created by Muriel Fahrion and Elena Kucharik in 1981 for a greeting card company (Kingdom of Caring, n.d.). The characters were adapted for the animated television series *Care Bears* created by Linda Denham and Elena Kucharik (Heyward & Katayama, 1985). The success of the characters and show launched numerous iterations of television shows, movies, and toy lines (Kingdom of Caring, n.d.).

community, to Little Village, to other Mexicanos in Chicago, and be a leader or representative for your community.” That was surface level, it was just the rhetoric that was told in general. No one told us why or what it means to work in community and find solutions together with the community. In the 80s and 90s, there was a focus on empowering young people to take on the world. Maybe it could be a generational thing, too, but the value of youth empowerment continues today.

PCV: *I’m curious what does it mean to do care work in your community?*

VAS: In high school and college I was never taught anything about social justice. I feel like everything I have learned about being more community-focused has been through friends, through the collective, and through working at Yollocalli. Understanding what it means to work in community includes asking how do I make sure that the work I'm doing isn't causing more harm? Or ensuring that we don't feel like we're the saviors of the community.

PCV: *That's really important, you're not doing this for this like self-aggrandizement. You're not doing this work to be thanked and applauded by your community, it's because you see these services being needed. And what you're modeling and teaching is for our collective well-being and not for individual gain.*

VAS: Definitely. Yeah.

PCV: *I think this is also a good segway into the next question. My next question is how can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning?*

VAS: To love someone is to care for someone. I don't feel like I could ever separate that from the learning space or from the community work because, again, it's all about caring for the people that you're working with. Maybe I throw the word love around a little bit too much, but it's because it's how I feel. I'm definitely in a place where I'm privileged to be surrounded by love, honestly, and care which is great. I just want everyone to also experience that because it's just a great place to be.

PCV: *How do you see care and love manifested in the collective?*

VAS: The group text is the ultimate tale of how much we love each other. Somebody will post one thing and every person will backfire with like, “We feel you, we love you, we got you.”

PCV: *I agree. I have to remind myself that knowing that the generative possibilities of love come from experiencing positive examples of love is such a privilege. How would you describe love in its expansive form?*

VAS: I would go back to care. It's about caring for an individual and wanting to see the best for them and helping them through that if that's not possible on their own. So, being that support and caring for them.

PCV: *I also think about how love can sometimes be difficult. If you care for someone, if you see them struggling, that love that you have for another person becomes the thing that really kind of keeps you sustained in the sometimes difficult but potentially generative labor of being in relationship with others.*

VAS: Yeah, again, it's about care. Caring for that person so much that it can take you to situations that can cause conflict between you and that person. Because either they're doing something wrong, or they think, you know, you're not giving them the support that they need or that they want. So, yeah, that's definitely something that can always happen. And then how do you mend that if it does break down? I think for our collective we're all very open-minded and we all know that we're all coming from a place of love whenever we're giving any type of support or feedback.

PCV: *I think that's really important. What do you, what are the manifestations of being with that extend beyond built communities? I'm thinking about how does the work of the collective extend beyond the collective and inform and influence perhaps other work with other groups and vice versa? How does our participation or work with other groups and other spaces then also filter back and inform the work of the collective?*

VAS: These are my people. These are just magical unicorns who have my back and who know I got their back. After they graduate college young people will tell me, "I don't know what to do next. I don't know how to continue to make art or feel connected to a community." I usually tell them, "Well, start off with some friends and make a collective. I'm in a collective and we don't like doing any... like we don't have notes. I mean, sometimes we have notes but it's more about just coming together and making work together, sharing best practices with each other, keeping each other motivated, and caring for each other." For me, that's one connection that the collective is growing outside of just the collective itself. And then, I feel like I always come to the collective to ask for advice on new teaching artists or just other needs.

If I'm crying with you all there's a beautiful reason for why I need to. In other spaces, if I'm crying, if they make me cry, it's because they hurt my feelings. And so, it makes me rethink, do I want to be a part of that space? Especially because in other groups they may try to push for the inclusion of more women but, are y'all ready for that? Because if you're making me feel like this, I don't think anyone else is gonna enjoy this experience either. Another good example is Marimacha Monarca Press,³⁸ they're like our collective, it's about love, it's about care, and having each other's backs.

PCV: *When we approach this work through an ethics of care, love, and interest for the person first, rather than the work, that space can be so different. When the focus is on the individualistic ego first and the collective second, or without consideration for reciprocity, it can be really damaging, even if you're trying to create a supportive and holistic community.*

VAS: Yeah, you said something like, if it focuses on the work as opposed to the individual... I feel like when you said that, I was like, "That's totally what I've experienced in other collectives." That approach does not center work for the community, it's almost like they're doing work because that's what they think they have to do. They have to put on a print festival, they have to put together a portfolio. But it's still self-serving because it's just helping those working artists in that group as opposed to, how is this really helping each other? Do we need all this stress? It's just not the same as our collective. Our collective is really about like, caring for each other first as a collective, and then that power as a collective is used for a greater good.

³⁸ Marimacha Monarca Press is a queer and trans Chicago-based collective (Hernández, n. d.).

PCV: *I think that there's still this expectation that you gotta hustle and you have to produce and produce. I was just thinking, why, and at what expense? I think the collective for sure, has really taught me to move away from that ingrained underlying capitalist grind culture. Even though the other collective is coming from a different space within the art world, it's structure is still predicated on an exploitative work mentality that, unfortunately, is also really tied to heteropatriarchal structures, which is really fucked up. I see the collective modeling something really different and that's been really helpful for me. I've been able to apply some of the collective's philosophy and approach to working in other spaces and that has been really generative.*

VAS: Yeah, I feel the same. Whether I knew I was building it this way or not, I feel that's what I try to maintain at Yollocalli with that team. It really is about the love for what we do and how we all care for each other, the teaching artists and the young people. Willie³⁹ really helped me see the light. I mean, I didn't know anything about being a teaching artist or running youth programs. There was also Maria Gaspar⁴⁰ and Anthony Rea,⁴¹ those three were a joy to work with. They were just so good with young people and so good at thinking of projects that weren't just the basics. They had young people think, and think on their own, think about what they wanted to do, and why they want to do it. That example really helped shape what Yollo⁴² is today. They're

³⁹ Willie is Vanessa's nickname for William Estrada.

⁴⁰ Maria Gaspar is a Chicago-based artist and educator. For many years, Maria worked as a teaching artist at a variety of organizations throughout Chicago including Yollocalli. She is friends with many members of the Chicago ACT Collective.

⁴¹ Antony Rea is a teaching artist who has relocated to his hometown of Kansas City, MO. He is one of William's closest friends and worked at Yollocalli for a brief period.

⁴² Yollo is the abbreviated form of Yollocalli, the teen education component of the National Museum of Mexican Art.

magical people. So, when William was like, “I’m gonna be in this collective, you’ve got to join.” I’m like, “Alright, Willie, let’s go.”

PCV: *I love it. Like magic inspires more magic or harnesses more magic.*

VAS: There was an era of young people at Yollocalli, I think they were their own collective. Even if they weren’t always making art, they were just friends. They cared for each other. I don’t know if they would see themselves as a collective. They probably see themselves more as friends, you know?

PCV: *Yeah. And I wonder what’s the distinction? Does it have to always be so clearly demarcated? I think what I’ve landed on is that there’s an intentional choice or decision to be in that community, what do you think is necessary for that to be established?*

VAS: Time, lots of time. Trust. Maybe that’s where I’m comparing Yollo with my new department, education. I haven’t had time to get to know everybody yet. I’m not sure if the trust is built, if they trust me. That’s why I feel I don’t have this like collective with them, yet. But with Yollo, I know everybody. I’ve known everyone for a long time. They trust me, I trust them, and I care for them. So, time, trust, moments to find joy. I think that’s where the camping came into play. The camping is what helped us get to know each other and bond and share stories. It wasn’t just like, we’re meeting to talk about a project; camping offered time to really hang out and just have fun. I think that that helps.

PCV: *Love it. And my last question asks, how do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

VAS: I think maybe we just get really comfortable. Maybe we're just a little bit afraid of how a new person will impact what has already been built? One thing about our collective though is that I feel like we're all very welcoming people. We would do our best if we did have anyone new, as opposed to other groups I mentioned, who I don't feel are ready to have new members. Especially anybody that's not hetero male and white, because they're white Latinos. The ACT Collective also has to be ready to open up the space for another person too. That person has to understand that sometimes our collective is just here for each other. We don't always have to do something. Maybe that is our example for ACT collective, maybe that's why we're also a little bit like, "Oh, if we add somebody should we be doing a project? What's happening to fold a new person in?"

I think it's really special to be able to invite other members of our family, whether it's our kids or our loved ones or parents, to be a part of camping, and by extension, the collective. It's not just a space to make, it's a space for love and for support.

William Estrada

Figure 18.

We Learn With Each Other by William Estrada



Note. William Estrada, *We Learn With Each Other*, 2022, digital drawing. Image courtesy of the artist.

William Estrada (WE): My name is William Estrada, I'm a visual artist, sometimes interdisciplinary artist, and educator. I reside in Cicero, IL, and most of my work is in the city of Chicago. I think my experiences growing up in multiple neighborhoods in multiple states – in Southern California, Chicago, and the state of Jalisco – have really shaped my relationships to communities or neighborhoods and the way that I attempt to learn from the people that are around me.

Paulina Camacho Valencia (PCV): *What is the Chicago ACT Collective, and who you are relative to the collective?*

WE: I don't know what my role is. I think that's one of the things that I really enjoy about the collective itself, I don't think any one of us holds a specific role, roles shift depending on the need of the collective, depending on our own capacity, depending on who is working on what. During our first meeting when we asked whether people wanted Sarah Atlas and me to share our description of the collective the way we imagined it, I remember specifically Amanda Cortés was like, "I appreciate you asking, but no. Don't share it with us, because that's going to influence the way that we see it." Instead of us sharing that with the whole group, "We should define it ourselves, as we experience it, as we talk about it, and as we get to know each other." I think that was one of the most beautiful things that could have ever happened because even just structurally, it decentered the hierarchy, it decentered whose collective it was. I think the Chicago ACT Collective is a group of friends, colleagues, and visionaries, people that inspire us that come together to vent, for support, to dream together, to learn how to live together, and to inspire each one of us to be the best versions of ourselves. The initial conversation that Sarah Atlas and I had about the collective was that we really wanted to find a group of individuals that

we wanted to hang out with, dream with, and imagine the different possibilities of our futures together for the city, for ourselves, for our families. The collective now is all of that and this decentralized collective of thinkers and makers. Each of us tries to bring our own personal work into the fold of what the collective is. The importance of our individuality and our collective learning and growth offers an opportunity for us to learn about the work that is happening, both at a hyper-local level, on each other's blocks, in the city, and nationally as well. And thinking about how do we learn from these movements? How do we research? How do we think about our responsibility as artists, administrators, musicians, as citizens to respond to the needs and the requests of both small and larger movements that are happening?

PCV: *That's awesome. And you're beginning to touch on my next question, what can artists collectives teach us about disrupting individualism, and harnessing the power of community for social change?*

WE: One of the reasons why I personally wanted to be part of this was because I was tired of doing work by myself, even though we're never really by ourselves. We're constantly in these learning communities and making communities creating things by ourselves and presenting work out in a neighborhood. Even when we're doing community engagement, some of those ideas have already been formalized and we're finishing them up with people. My interest in being part of this collective was the fact that I was really interested in collective thinking so we could decenter our own ideas. In doing that my particular interest was in growth, how do we push each other to learn and grow, as individuals, as artists, and as creators? Initially, I imagined the collective as this working group, where we came together to constantly work and respond, or create movement work. I think we still do that but there's also been a long-standing discussion

about resting, eating together, hanging out with each other, camping, and removing ourselves from the work in order to take care of each other, take care of ourselves, and to think deeper about what it means for us to build a community. To know that we're part of this larger group of people that really cares about us is really beautiful. It's been something that I definitely want to be part of, but it's not necessarily the way that I thought it was gonna be. Which was a nice surprise.

PCV: *So lovely. This leads me to the next question, how can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning?*

WE: I love love. I think that's a complicated question because love is complicated. I don't think everyone has experienced love. It's hard for people to imagine being loved and loving someone, not necessarily in an unconditional way where you would give everything up, but loving someone in ways that allows you to see beyond the layers that they're presenting, and think about what it is that they're trying to tell you, what it is that they're feeling, what it is that they need from you in order for them to move beyond that initial conversation. I think that's where mutual learning comes from. In thinking about healthy love, critical love, that allows us to critique, that allows us to ask questions, that will allow us to be vulnerable, I think that kind of love with practice can be that catalyst, for asking deeper questions, for showing up for people when they need us the most. I think it's also about learning how we communicate with each other learning about what triggers us and learning about what makes us upset. I think it's not only loving others, but it's understanding and allowing us to love ourselves. Not in a narcissistic way where everything becomes about us but loving ourselves enough to allow ourselves to learn from those that we love. That's one thing that I've really appreciated from the relationships that have formed

with the collective. I truly believe that the collective has made me a better person, it has made me a better citizen, teacher, and parent because we function through the lens and the framework of love. We are constantly sharing with each other what it means to exist in this group, what it means to live, what it means to manage our relationships with our own biological families, with our own chosen families. It's through that sharing that we learn to see ourselves and see each other. That constant showing up for each other, at whatever capacity you're able to, is really missing from other relationships that I'm part of.

And I really believe now that whenever I want to deepen my relationship with someone, I'm just like, "We should go camping." I think of camping as a metaphor. There are all of these tiny little pieces in camping that allow us to communicate with each other about our needs, our comfort levels, the things that we have, and the things that we're lacking. Camping puts us in a situation where we have to be transparent about our needs and others also have to be conscious of our needs. I think it's this constant checking in with each other about what it means for us to care for each other and love each other. I think that camping is a beautiful metaphor and a good way to practice how we exist with each other.

PCV: *That's so beautiful. It was a really wonderful decision and idea for all of us to start camping together. My next question is, what are the manifestations of being with that extend beyond built communities?*

WE: The people that we reached out to when we wanted to form the collective was a list compiled by Sarah and myself of people that we wanted to learn from and work with. I really believe that for my individual growth I want to learn from the people that I admire. I want to be around the people that I look up to. And I look up to people for different reasons, sometimes it's

for their work, sometimes it's because of the work they do and the way they do it, sometimes it's because of how loving and caring they are. All of these are different intersections of who they are and how they show up in the work that they're doing. I think for me, it was really about, how do I learn from the people that are part of this collective? And then, how do I learn from their experiences that can help me imagine different ways of existing? I also learned that as a teacher you were limited in thinking and talking about things that were hard to engage with, predominately topics like race, gender, the wrongs and the beautiful things about society. I wanted to engage in difficult conversations. Not just because I was interested in learning why these conversations were hard to engage with but also because I wanted to model how to talk about these things and not necessarily always have an answer, or even to try and figure out what an answer is, but just to question.

I think that my interest was in learning how other people are thinking. How are how other people are manifesting? How other people are working through the process of questioning our role as citizens, our role as artists, our role as educators within these oppressive systems that were set up specifically to rob people of their resources, and to epitomize a very small group of people? I've noticed that the people that I've admired, the people that I continuously look to for guidance model how we challenge these notions of being shitty people. With the idea of power comes this reliance on subversiveness, on taking advantage of people, and being manipulative. I think the people that I've worked with, the people that I have been close to, a lot of 'em, although none of us are perfect, have really attempted to work through transparency and vulnerability and model what it looks like to apologize when we fuck up. How do we model talking about our feelings, without letting our feelings blind us as well? How do we make sure that our feelings are part of the discussions, and where our feelings come from? I'm constantly told that feeling

shouldn't play a part in the decisions that we're making. But feelings are always part of it. We're human beings, and we can't let the decisions that we make not be part of the feelings that we have. So, I think that's one part.

It's also challenging what it means to be in relationships with others. In learning with each other we're also attempting to restructure what it means to be in relationships. I use the word relationships because I think when we think about relationships, I usually think about you know, partners, lovers, these relationships with people that we are intimate with. I think if we were really to think about the relationships that we have with others we are not intimate with, how do we want to treat them? How do we want to acknowledge them? How do we want to make sure that they feel seen? I think that's one of the things that this collective has shown me, how we learn to interact with people who we might not have as deep a relationship with and try to understand them and the layers of complexities and understanding that we bring to those relationships. You can be who you are as long as it's a healthy interaction. We have to keep thinking about what effects we have on each other through these relationships. I'm constantly relearning what those relationships mean. I'm afraid that I'm going to become the person that I've constantly been criticizing. I think that's also a big part of why I'm part of this collective, I want to be held accountable by those that I respect, and that I love to make sure that I don't become the person that I did not like growing up.

PCV: *That's super important, the capacity for self-reflection. At what point does the ego get released? I also don't want to become the things that I critique. I hope, like you, that we have created a trusting and loving enough community that y'all would be like, "Look, we need to talk. Bajale dos rayitas, porfavor." My last question and I don't know if we've approached this yet, but how do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

WE: Personally, I would love to open it up. I would love to open it up to people that are searching and are specifically thinking about similar things that we are attempting to do, that are working towards those layers of transparency, those layers of community building. I think it's important for us to acknowledge the need for new ideas to be introduced, for new ways of us looking at each other and the work that we do. And also thinking specifically thinking about what does it mean for our collective work now that people are in different states. We're not all in the same city. Does our work look the same? Does it change? Because it's no longer exclusively Chicago-based. So, what does it mean for it to be the Chicago ACT Collective and for people not to be in Chicago anymore? I think it should be hyper-local. I think this should be where the majority of us are, based on the relationships that people have. I also think that we need to question why the collective exists because I think it exists now for very different reasons than what it was initially created for. If it is just for us, why is it just for us? I think if we can answer that question, then it should be just for us.

If I remember correctly, part of why it's just for us is because we're still learning from each other. But most of us were friends before the formation of the collective, most of us had these relationships with each other in one way or another. I think it would also be interesting trying to figure out how we invite others to learn from us and so we can learn from them. But also in a way for us to model what they can do in other groups if that makes sense? So maybe they become part of the Chicago ACT Collective not so they can just be part of the Chicago ACT Collective but so they could start something that is adjacent to the Chicago ACT Collective. We're modeling and we're learning from them, and we're supporting them. Sometimes I wish we could be doing more. I wish we could camp more and not do so much work. Being in a large group makes it challenging, but the more we grow the harder it is for us to come together. And I

think that's where the growth piece makes it hard. Once you become too big, then the relationships aren't all there. Even now, I think that we're really big. I don't think we all really talk to each other as much as I think I would like to; I don't think we all get to hang out with each other in the ways that I, personally, would like to. But I do think that we all benefit from being in this collective together.

Hilesh Patel

Figure 19.

how to build a house on the ocean by Hilesh Patel

how to build a house on the ocean

first find a wave		there is no cost
because you are putting		up your selves as
collateral		do not clear the
property the ocean		is the ocean is the
ocean prepare the land		build a foundation
build the frame	I want th	gather your people
bring them together	at feeling	unwrap their
shoulders	where yo	and pull them
away from	u long fo	pulling away
the roof is voices	r the oce	reaching for a
heaven that is not	an to cha	a heaven but
a vaulted sky of	nge the d	folding hands and
wood not yet burned	irection o	by the people
who burned	f its wave	the lands
they landed on	s to aban	paint the
walls	don its an	lay the floor
with words	ger towar	windows should be
small enough	d the land	to crawl through
big enough	I want the	to catch a wave
build a door	feeling of	that
opens in	becoming	opens out
make the hearth	a little mo	a motor
stand there	re than	hungry
skin on fire		tasting salt
on your lips		crushed
bone		unbroken

- Hilesh Patel

Note. Hilesh Patel, *how to build a house on the ocean*, 2022. Included with the permission of the author.

Hilesh Patel (HP): I am Hilesh Patel, a proud member of the Chicago ACT Collective, and I am currently the Executive Director of an investigative journalism organization. That is my day job. In addition to that, I am a poet, and in addition to that, I do pro bono consulting for individuals or organizations. That work can be a little bit of professional coaching or helping organizations with development, board functions, human resources, stuff like that.

Paulina Camacho Valencia (PCV): *Can you describe what is, and who makes up the ACT collective?*

HP: When it started, Sarah and William wrote the Propeller grant,⁴³ the way it was proposed, it was going to be a printmaking collective and a group of artists coming together. But then I realized the way we were defining artists and the way we're defining ourselves has evolved. Now, the Collective is, and I can answer it in two different ways, like who they are to me, and then who I think they are as people. As people and as artists, they are artists that engage the world with art, with empathy, through a critical lens, and a lot of heart in a way that feels familial, or I recognize as kin. And that leads to who they are to me, they are people that I've come to trust and people that I feel have broken down a lot of my walls.

I think it is important to say that we're not coming to this [work through] brand identity, or trying to market ourselves, or even fiscally growing ourselves. We all came together because we believed in the work. In believing in the world, we recognized that we were part of a larger picture and that every time we entered space, we entered space collaboratively. That's why we entered space collaboratively because we knew that we were part of a larger collective and that our hub, which is very familial, functions a certain way but also has a lot to contribute.

⁴³ See footnote 31.

PCV: *The first question is, what can an artist collective, in particular the Chicago Act Collective, teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change?*

HP: There's something about movement within a collective. I know, this is such an overused term, but I adore adrienne maree brown, she says, “You move at speed of trust.”⁴⁴ There's something about a collective where that is so acutely true. At some point, the collective actually started being a collective in ways that I was both hungry for and yearning for and needed. [Initially, I] was very guarded and reticent and no one ever said, “If you don't get here, in the next year, you're out.” The patience that the collective has taken with me personally, as I've gone through the cycle of just letting down all my armor and then being more and more..., I still have a long way to go, has been extraordinary.

When you talk about disrupting individualism, it's not that you become one and you're like, “We are the ACT Collective.” I look at my transformation throughout this process, and for me, the individualism is not that I'm offering up my identity or that I'm sacrificing something, it's that I'm moving closer and closer to trust.

I know, we've done this kind of loosely, but at no point did we come together and say, “We're gonna make a charter. We're going to do this; we're going to do that.” For me, it's less about how do you create this model so other people can use it, as it is a way to understand, how do you understand the story? The story is partly the story of that collective and the story of the people individually within the ACT Collective. When you get to social change, that has been the

⁴⁴ brown, 2017.

core and the crux of the work since day one. Everyone came together because we were committed to social change.

PCV: *My next question is, how can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning?*

HP: I've been in so many interesting spaces where I've been having conversations about trans life, *The Matrix: Resurrections*,⁴⁵ Harry Potter,⁴⁶ and J. K. Rowling, I can push J. K. Rowling to the side, but then what does community really mean? There's something about this definition, whether it's the Harry Potter series or different books, where people come together and overcome a problem where love is the key. And people kind of dismiss that because love for them is this pedantic or kind of sensationalized or amorphous idea. Love is a catchphrase for something, but what they're really trying to say is that it's not just trust, it's trust in movement. It's almost like you take trust and you choreograph trust, and when you choreograph trust it becomes love. And so, how can love function as a catalyst for sustained reciprocal teaching and learning, for me, it's this idea of choreographed trust. Trust is the catalyst, you choreograph it, and then the community is what sustains it. But what's really interesting for me is the idea of reciprocity in your question, teaching and learning. The idea that you can exist in a space and you can exist in a collective moving through the world where there's a constant dialogue happening. You're able to go back and forth, and you're able to fall flat on your ass, you're able to say, a stupid thing, you're able to test out ideas, and the people around you will hold you up you know, that's the way I think about this question. I struggle with that in my job because there are times when that comes

⁴⁵ Wachowski, 2021.

⁴⁶ Hilesh was referencing the popular fantasy novel series written by J. K. Rowling (1997-2007) which center the main character, Harry Potter.

close to people inflicting harm. I don't know what that means. That's something that we should think about, obviously, and I don't know if we'll ever get there. I think we're a good group with each other but I think about how you don't want to be punitive and you don't want to be carceral about your responses. But at the same time, if someone says, I'm harmed, I want to honor that. And so I'm wrestling with that. Anyway, I veered off, but for me, this idea of love is choreographed trust and the idea of reciprocity is a constant practice. you have to be constantly practicing this. For us, I know tangibly, that might look like Friday night Zoom calls, but that's not what it really was. It was more than that.

PCV: *I appreciate that you bring up the notion of the potential to inflict harm when talking about love, that's such an important reminder... My next question is, what are the manifestations of being with that extend beyond built communities? I'm thinking about this question through two different paths, what are the intersecting dynamics that we inhabit outside of the collective that also inform our relationships within the collective? The second part of this question is thinking about how the work or the values within the collective inform our work and interactions outside of the collective.*

HP: I don't know how to talk about that. It's not even the intersecting relationships for me it's about letting people in the collective be close to the people that they're close to, that in no way sacrifices the collective trust that we've built. And then the second part is harder. I don't think we're there yet if I can be perfectly honest, in terms of external communities and internal communities or the equilibrium or the dialogue between who we are internally and then how we function with other groups. Because all of us function individually, or sometimes in pairs, or different configurations, modular of who we are with different external groups. But as a

collective, we don't necessarily, and that's really interesting. I think that's just something that we're gonna keep growing at. That's something I'm totally fine with. If we ever want to do anything more and be a little bit more formal then we'll have to hit that head-on because that's something we haven't figured out yet.

PCV: *Thank you, I appreciate that. My next question is, what are the manifestations of being with that extend beyond built communities?*

HP: I also have been thinking about that a lot recently, especially as it pertains to my job because there is often a critique that the core team at my current organization operates in a very exclusive way. There is no porosity, there is no way to penetrate that group. I think for us, it's interesting because this really is about just what does it mean to create pathways in and create pathways out. Do we have that? I think we're porous enough that we do that but the counterpoint to that is, what does it mean to protect the people inside the collective? You're not going to invite someone who could potentially bring harm. You're also not gonna invite someone who's going to disrupt the dynamics. There's an intentionality. It's about how you bring someone in and, for lack of a better way of saying it, the temporal nature of how long they're in the space. I think if you can have a porosity where people are allowed to come in and out and have fidelity to that, that's great. But when it comes time for someone to come in for longer periods of time, it requires almost like an equation. If they remain for longer periods of time then we need to have a talk, all of us together. If someone's gonna come in and be part of this project for three weeks or six months well that's something we should talk about. What does this mean? Is this going to disrupt the dynamic? Also, don't everyone get weird. But I hope that we're porous enough that people can come in and out. But also, we're not an organization, you know. But to answer very

succinctly, it's about creating pathways in and out of the collective. And if we were thinking about this in terms of an equation, how do you add time to the equation? How long will someone be in the collective? What does it mean to invite someone into the space, the theoretical space with grace and with friendship and generosity?

Silvia Ines Gonzalez

Figure 20.

Love in the Time Of⁴⁷ Exhibition Curated by Silvia Ines Gonzalez



Note. Images courtesy of Silvia Ines Gonzalez.

⁴⁷ Chicago Art Department, 2021.

Figure 21.

Detail of Love In The Time Of⁴⁸ Exhibition Curated by Silvia Ines Gonzalez



Note. Image courtesy of Silvia Ines Gonzalez.

⁴⁸ Chicago Art Department, 2021.

Silvia shared the following press release for the *Love in the Time Of*⁴⁹ exhibition she curated (Chicago Art Department, 2021):

Ciera McKissick
Communications & Media Resident
ciera@chicagoartdepartment.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE — CHICAGO 07/13/2021

The Chicago Art Department celebrates the return of Second Fridays with a new exhibition and an act of love for Chicago's rich organizing history.

Second Fridays are back at the Chicago Art Department, and so are exhibition openings. The non-profit arts organization opened a new exhibition, "Love In The Time Of" last weekend curated by resident artist and educator, Silvia Gonzalez, and features the work of Chicago ACT (Artists Creating Transformation). The show, as described in the exhibition statement, was conceived as "an ongoing ellipse of our commitment to create from the various dimensions of love as we envision and move toward liberation."

The exhibition presents a collection of prints from collective members highlighting various justice movements and work that reflects and responds to the current local concerns of the most directly impacted — concerns like that of lead toxicity and the Hilco implosion in Little Village. A tent also serves as the centerpiece of the exhibition, in reference to the group's way of practicing collective care.

The collective is comprised of a group of artists, activists, educators, arts administrators, and thinkers and includes, William Estrada and Sarah Atlas, the collective founders, alongside other members — Paulina Camacho Valencia, Rudy Esparza, Juan Carlos Perez, Amanda Cortes, Jessica Mueller, Vanessa Sanchez, Eric Reyes, Karen Reyes, Eric J. Garcia, Ivan Arenas, Nicole Marroquin, Hilesh Patel, and Silvia Inés Gonzalez. The group came together in 2016 to create work responding to justice and local grassroots efforts, and quickly grew into "a family" that even goes on camping trips together.

During the Covid shutdown, the collective hosted Zoom check-ins and talked about radical care as a strategy, released prints online as coloring pages for the community to engage with to pass the time indoors, and have done many cross collaborations and supported movements like Freedom Square, a 41-day overnight occupation, protest encampment, and block party opposing Homan Square, the CPD 'black site' where thousands of Chicagoans have been

⁴⁹ Chicago Art Department, 2021.

illegally detained and tortured spearheaded by the Let Us Breathe Collective, Ayotzinapa 43 in response to 43 male students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College who were forcibly abducted and then disappeared in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico, May Day, Hell No Hilco campaign in Little Village, and others.

This is Gonzalez's second exhibition curated at the Chicago Art Department, and the second she's ever done, both of which speak to her organizing roots.

"Organizing these exhibitions has allowed a necessary breath," Silvia Gonzales says. "A moment to pause to reflect on the value of relationships in organizing. Oftentimes, the term 'rapid response' declares an urgency in creating work to immediately address systemic harm. By curating these shows, I have developed a strong appreciation for the opportunity to love, care, and breathe with the people I am creatively imagining justice with," she said.

The Chicago Art Department will also be re-installing their recent exhibition, "Seeds In My Pocket," which features a symphony of voices from 10 black and brown artists from the Chicago neighborhoods of Pilsen and South Shore, co-curated by and muralists Dorian Sylvain (South Shore) and Pablo Serrano (Pilsen) to tell the story of the cultural influence of Black migrants and Mexican immigrants.

Although we may not be liberated quite yet from the pandemic, or the issues the artists address in the exhibition, it does feel quite freeing to engage with art again in this way. Both exhibitions run from July 9 - August 31. There will be an additional Second Friday reception on August 13, along with a CAD Market featuring works from Chicago Art Department resident artists.

###

Silvia Ines Gonzalez (SIG): My name is Silvia Ines Gonzalez and I'm one of the members of the Chicago ACT Collective. I'm an artist, and I'm also an educator in Chicago Public Schools where I teach art for grades k-8, elementary students.

Paulina Camacho Valencia (PCV): *You're so many more things. Everyone has been so modest with this question, but we'll get into your brilliance later. Can you describe or tell me a little bit more about the ACT Collective?*

SIG: I always start by describing that ACT stands for artists creating transformation. We got together in 2016, William Estrada and Sara Atlas put us all together in a room with beer and art and told us to be our best selves and make magic together, and we did. I think that's the playful summary of it. But I think the reality is, that we're a group of folks that have unifying strengths and concerns for the communities we care about and want to create alternatives to harm and systems of oppression. We do this through caring for each other and caring for our communities. We do this through creating art and getting together and talking. And that's the system we've built within our collective.

PCV: *Gracias, and how do you see yourself within the larger organism of the collective?*

SIG: I feel really safe with the people that [are part of the collective]. I see myself as someone who is honored and appreciated and taken care of. I see the collective as an extension of family for me, so it really feels like we're really great friends, but we're more than that because we have chosen to be in arms with each other.

I see myself as someone who brings in that artist-educator lens and who is honored for it. I also think of myself as someone who's always thinking of our work, in terms of archiving it and preserving it and building from it. I think that's also why when I did the curatorial work for *Love in the Time Of*,⁵⁰ that really felt like I was putting my best foot forward in bringing our work to a larger public through an exhibition. I really felt like I was allowed to use all of the different things that I love using that I often either don't get acknowledged for, as a woman of color or have the space to be trusted with it. I felt really capable of putting together an exhibition, archiving our work, and sharing it with the larger public. As a collective member, I see myself as someone who sees the need to document, kind of like a documentarian. Even when we first started getting together I was always taking photos of our events with my camera because I wanted to have really nice photos of what we were doing and documentation of the moments that we were sharing together. And then archiving that and reusing it as material for showing our work to a larger public.

PCV: *Thank you. We're gonna transition into the questions. The first question is, what can an artist collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change?*

SIG: I find that the ACT collective honors the individual capacity so much, that it's almost like, "I see you, and together, we can do this." When I think of the culture of individualism, I think, "I need, what can I do? What do I do? Or what do I need?" I think when I am part of the collective, or over the past few years, I see it as, "Silvia, you are important, you can do this, I trust you with

⁵⁰ Chicago Art Department, 2021.

it.” I think the collective has taught me a lot about moving at the speed of trust.⁵¹ There's a lot of trust that happens [in the collective] where folks are activating as a collective. There's an expectation and there's also a lot of trust in the work that [everyone] brings, “I trust the knowledge that you bring, I trust that we will meet this need because we care.” I think for me, moving at the speed of trust⁵² is also underlined with a lot of care and with a lot of common dignity for one another.

And I've learned a lot about celebrating each other's strengths and celebrating each other's areas of growth. I think that's the marker of what has felt so different. We don't try to change our growth areas, we just support one another, wherever we're at, with whatever we're dealing with. I feel like, as an individual, I'm seen, but I'm also honored for what I bring. I think my biggest lesson with the collective is, what does it mean to move at the speed of trust? What does it mean to work from the place of love? What does it mean, to collaborate with community? Because we each have connections to the communities we're working with and we want to see our communities thrive as well.

PCV: *Clearly we're from the same collective because everything you're saying is a lot of the same things that I've been sitting with and thinking through. It's really lovely to hear. And, How can love function as a catalyst for sustaining reciprocal teaching and learning? And how does that function within the collective?*

SIG: Love is a catalyst. Love is made up of a lot of different things, as bell hooks⁵³ talked about, like care, responsibility, and trust, among other things. If I know that you care, if I know that I

⁵¹ brown, 2017.

⁵² brown, 2017.

⁵³ hooks, 1999.

can trust, if I know that we share a sense of responsibility, then I know we're building from a place of love. And I think that allows for folks to be vulnerable. It's almost like a constant action-reaction, action-reaction, it becomes this beautiful beat almost. When I think of this question, I think a catalyst is a thing that kind of sparks, right? It's what starts the action. I think that love is maybe the ambiguous thing you want to believe is what's happening in order to be involved in this, but actually, it's the thing that has developed over the course of time and it keeps humming back and forth. It's like, "Action-reaction, action-reaction, I trust you, action-reaction, I love you, action-reaction, I can be vulnerable with you, action-reaction." I think the hope is that we start with love, and that hope is almost like, "I am going to be brave and jump into this." But I think that as far as teaching and learning go, once that love is developed and has a little bit more rhythm to it, I can show up as my full self. I can be the diva on the camping trip. But I can also be a person who can quietly observe and absorb what you all talk about,

I think that's built from like a sense of humility of wanting to learn from other folks and a sense of vulnerability and tenderness that happens. If I really don't understand something I can be vulnerable and frustrated, and tell you, "Hey, I really, I don't get it. Can somebody please?" I know that I can say that because we have responsibility, trust, care, and love. Love is a multi-layered thing. It's not just a feeling, you know? I think that's probably one of my favorite questions on here.

PCV: *What have been important components that have allowed you to show up as your full self, that has allowed or enabled you to be vulnerable and move through this work from an orientation rooted in love?*

SIG: I think part of it is seeing it modeled by so many people in the collective and feeling it right away. Everyone has slightly different personalities in the collective, but everyone models care. And so, once I see that modeled by other folks in the collective. I'm like, "Okay, I can also be vulnerable. I can also share this idea and know that it's not going to sound wild to these people. I can be vulnerable and share my political beliefs and know that these people will take this comment seriously and we'll have a good conversation about it." I think the other part too, what allows me to show up as my full self is humor. I find humor to be an important intelligence, which is probably why I use humor to cope with a lot of things. But I sincerely believe that humor kind of breaks and disrupts some of that deep intense shit we talk about, you know. Sitting around a campfire and laughing with people who you've built important things with and knowing that they're just as human as you and that they love you is really precious.

We all model this kind of approach for each other, but we also make the space to breathe together, to laugh together, to cook together, to do the dishes together. I think those have become, for me, rituals specific to us. They are everyday mundane tasks, like washing the dishes, wiping them down, and putting our stuff away from camping. But to do those together in service of one another and to understand that we're showing up for one another in this very mundane way, but we're here and we're doing it. It's our ritual. We go camping, we go by the fire at night, we laugh together, and then we come home and we make art about injustices in our city. And we talk about anything under the sky. And we can still feel loved.

PCV: *That's beautiful, amiga. so what are the manifestations of being with that extend beyond built communities? And here, I'm thinking about what are the manifestations of us being together, being a collective, that extend beyond the community that we've built together. What are the lessons learned, the values, the things that have been modeled that have seeped and*

poured out into other parts of our life, whether it's in our work in our families and or collaborations with others?

SIG: I think the first thing I think about is how physical these manifestations are for us. The posters that we make that are shared all over the city are one example. But I also think about the ways in which we engage relationships, art, and advocacy in community. I think that's the biggest thing in terms of manifesting, being with is literal and is metaphorical. The literal is we literally have made so many posters and have developed so many projects in conjunction to needs that our rise with school or with communities or with community groups or grassroots organizations or other collectives in the city. The metaphorical version of that is the manifestation that happens with our approach to advocacy. I think of the layout. We are invited into someone's home, or someone's important and valued workspace. We all bring a snack, drinks, or food. We are literally in communion with each other, over food, over drinks, over company. I like that it's intergenerational and we have the kids involved, the young folks. I like that we all have slightly different walks of life. We all come from slightly different places. And yet we come together in a house or in a place with beer and food and a project. When [the work begins] there is this sort of like, "Can you do this?" And it's like, "I trust you with this responsibility." Or it's also like, "Well, what would you like to do with this?" And that's where folks are able to step up and step into a way to participate. I think that's what makes the difference if you give folks the opportunity to see where they can step in and step up. You're trusting their expertise in their story, which I think by default, is resistant or counter to dominant cultures' approach to the way we function. It's an immediate form of resistance to any systems that are oppressive because you're saying, "Hey, here's the thing we have to get done. How will you step in and step up?" And then it's just letting go and trusting that person to do that, and

trusting their expertise, their skill sets. If that person feels like, “Oh, well, I’ve never printed a poster before.” Well, “I have. I can show you how to do it.” Somebody else steps up and steps in. But that doesn’t mean that person is no longer going to print a poster, it means now you have two people in communion who are supporting each other in a joint effort. If you invite folks to share food, and drink, which are technically human necessities, but also a way of being in communion with other people, then you allow people to show up with whatever they have. You invite them to participate and you allow them to do whatever they can, where their capacity is, I think that’s sort of what almost organically motivates people to do their best, and to bring their best, and to be honest about what they don’t know. You know, that’s the concrete vision I have of it. Whatever you bring is valued. Whatever you don’t know will be supported by someone who can bring that. Like, that’s so cool. That’s just really comforting for me to think about and to not be ridiculed for not knowing something. Instead, just encouraged allowed to fail with other people. Like, “Oh, this print didn’t come out, right.” That’s okay, here’s another paper.

PCV: *Gracias. Okay, last question. How do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of the ACT Collective structure?*

SIG: I don’t want to operate from a deficit. I think it’s wonderful that two separate collective spaces can come together and create something together. And then we can also go our separate ways and continue that work with these different collective spaces. And we can always come back to it again, just because it was done once doesn’t mean it’s one and done. And so, I think that’s where the porosity happens, right? I think with the ACT Collective, we are safe with each other. And we want to honor and respect that. We already have a flow; we already have a rhythm. I think the porosity happens when we collaborate with others, not from a space of

competition or deficit, but from a space of asset and support structure. The answer is that our power is our collective. We can come together and build solidarity. That doesn't mean we can't see each other as contributors, and that doesn't mean the conversation starts and ends there, and then we're competing again. I think it actually means we're always in a constant fluidity, and we can always connect, again, re-connect. We don't have to think from a deficit model, we don't have to think with a competitive model, we can think differently.

Karen Benita Reyes

Figure 22.

Karen and Eric Screen-print Fabric



Note. Members of the Chicago ACT Collective screen-printed fabric for a quilt we collaboratively made for Amanda and García in anticipation of the birth of the newest member of the collective, Sixto Fidel García-Cortés, 2020. Image courtesy of Hilesh Patel.

Karen shared the following statements:

Hi Pau,

Here is my submission to you for your dissertation. It is an adaptation and expansion (evolution?) of something I started for work in an attempt to put to words the things that I feel that we are trying to do at Firebird.⁵⁴ Someone who visited and admired what we were doing asked me about our pedagogy, and I kind of laughed because I spent all that time studying education/learning, and I was “hmm...hell if I know.”

Alongside that, I am beginning to consider what can be useful about the way we do things as much as the outcomes of the work that we do (for youth, in the case of Firebird). I need to learn more about cooperative/collaborative models and traditions in communities and organizations and am sort of just toe-dipping to prep myself for the work of a deeper dive into reading/researching. But as I thought about it, I also considered how the ACT Collective has been an action research project on this all along too. So I tried to cross-pollinate what I was thinking and theorizing about for work with what I have been learning and practicing with you all. Obviously, I’m also leaning heavily on other people’s work. Some include: adrienne maree brown, Robin Wall Kimmerer, I thought about Eric Klinenberg’s work Heat Wave, Suzanne Simard, Kevin Kumashiro, among many others.

So, I think there are bits of all your questions reflected here. I hope you can suss them out, but let me know if you need me to more directly indicate where I see them showing up.

⁵⁴ Karen has been the Executive Director of Firebird, an arts-based non-profit organization, for a decade.

As I wrote, I longed to be able to visually express some of the ideas I had and images that I could imagine in my head, but then I remembered that that's part of the mutuality among us. I need you all and treasure all of your work. I hope my words at least begin to do us justice.

With loving care,

k

(Reyes, personal communication, 2022)

A Pedagogy of Belonging

Observations on Our Mutuality and Collectivity

- ✿ We are expansive and enough. No matter what else is going on, there is someone and someplace for all of us here. We are always pushing out on who counts as who we are.
- ✿ We have enough among us of what we all need. Everything else that we want we can work on together.
- ✿ We are each other's translators, buffers, and protectors. We are all invested in each other's survival, growth, and success. Self-sufficiency is a murderous myth that divides us and causes us to punish ourselves.
- ✿ All flourishing is mutual. There is no zero sum game, because our existence is interdependent on each other and our natural world.
- ✿ We are all learning from each other. This can feel warm and it can feel uncomfortable. We can manage both.
- ✿ We have time. Growth requires mental, temporal, and geographic space. Time, slowness, emptiness. We move at the speed of trust; we stay for the duration of interest and joy. We open our homes and buildings to each other. We make space together outdoors.
- ✿ We center the living world (human and non-human), while also attending to systems of power. We name these systems, dissect them, leverage them, and work to balance them.
- ✿ We cannot do this without us. Collective decisions are wiser and more durable than unilateral decisions. We work on trans-lateral decisions, where trans means across, beyond, through, and lateral refers to sides. (Reyes, personal communication, 2022)

Karen B. Reyes (KR): I'm Karen Reyes, I'm a product of the Chicago Public Schools and public universities too. I'm a native Chicagoan and Executive Director of Firebird Community Arts. I'm the mother of Una Reyes and a forever dog owner.

Paulina Camacho Valencia (PCV): *Everyone's just so lovely and modest. I appreciate the mention that you're a forever dog owner. Can you please describe the Chicago ACT Collective?*

KBR: [The Collective is] like an outsized amazing presence in my life that's hard to describe concisely. But I would say it's a group mostly motivated by loving caring connection that was brought together by William Estrada and Sarah Atlas, with the idea of creating art in response to local political and social movements of the moment in Chicago. It has drifted in a lovely way from that really practical work-based inception to something that does a whole lot more and is about how we care for ourselves and each other, our movements, and our city. And how we have dialogue about that and keep up with each other. It's a good practice space for being brave and trying to bring up things that are hard in our lives or in the world, and sort of have dialogue about them in ways that's not rewarded or sort of frowned upon in other settings in our culture.

As we were talking before recording Pau, to me, it also serves as a laboratory for family. I'll use the word that you've inserted into my head, kinship, outside of blood relations and even this historical or cohabitation kind of relations. For me, it's also an intergenerational space where a lot of the work of the collective is held by the adults, but the young people are always present through us, and actually just in the physical space, and have this sort of equal footing to engage with the adults and are invited to do so and to be part of what it is that we're doing as a collective.

PCV: *And then how do you see yourself within the larger structure of the collective?*

KBR: I feel loved and held no matter what. [What we contribute is] very shape-shifty and amorphous. People get in where they fit in. That's what I've seen the whole collective doing, shape shift, being the tool that's needed at that time. And trying to listen carefully to what is needed, and adapt. We maintain our principles, but also adapt to the needs of the movements and the needs of each other.

PCV: *So, what can an artist collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change?*

KBR: I think as far as disrupting individualism, the way that stands out first is in our approach to doing the work. When we were doing more work it was about listening to the needs of [others and our collaborators]. When we were generating our own ideas and thinking about stuff it was more about being in service to something that will be used in the city or have a bigger impact than just us producing a [stand alone] piece. But then also, for me, it puts my own ideas and prerogatives in check or in a community context. That's been a good learning experience for me, having a great idea in your own head that can't translate into something that moves people or something actionable, or whatever, it's great, but it's not really good enough in this context.

I have an intern at Firebird who said, about Firebird, that the forcefield is love. And if you don't vibrate at the right frequency, you can't get in. I think that's true of the collective. I feel like we're sort of world-building, like we're experimenting with a model of what it's like to create different relationships from what we experienced in our families, in our workplace, and in other friendships. It's this sort of hybrid, weird, awesome thing. And so, I feel like that's also productive in a different way.

PCV: *I'm curious about your perceptions of the shifts, or these orientations. What do you feel has enabled us to let go of this production based way of approaching this work and instead move into this world building way of being together?*

KBR: I don't know if this is totally an answer to that, but one spectrum that I think about all the time, I think because of my upbringing, is the small is all versus larger systemic change approach to this work.⁵⁵ How do we make life livable, and be in right relationship with each other in as many spaces as we can, while working towards something bigger? I noticed that a lot in myself, sometimes I have the urge to be like, "I did that, I'm going to move on." But actually, the things that are most important, you find yourself relearning again and again. So, I think the collective, or my hope is that the collective is doing this kind of thing where we have to regroup, take care of ourselves, figure stuff out, do the world building, tend to our world, to our forcefield. And then we also need to go back out and look at what's happening and where we're needed and engage in that process again and again. That's how I'm thinking about it now.

PCV: *I love this emergent cycle of praxis. I'm there with you, I'm also eager and excited to get on to the next thing, because there's so much to learn and do. Sometimes it's feels like the universe is forcing me to be like, "Nah, there's still more to learn in this realm, in this area. You just have to be patient and cycle back." So, how can love then function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning. And here I'm thinking about love as a catalyst not just for teaching and learning, but just sustained being with, sustained communities, and then also as a force for social change.*

⁵⁵ brown, 2017.

KBR: It feels like a revolutionary idea to start with love. It's discouraged in capitalism, in all of our relations, even family relations, you know. And so, I feel that's what we've been practicing doing, how to center and recenter and reprioritize love with each other.

I'm thinking about the role of critique in the arts and how do we expand that lovingly and apply it to our emotional life? What does being critical or asking hard questions look like? On the one hand, this collective is a magical space that we've built, it's that force field. I never want to say anything that diminishes that, but I actually think not saying anything critical diminishes it in a way because it makes it sort of like a fairy tale thing. I was thinking about it in relation to critique in arts education, which always blows my mind because I didn't go to art school. So when I see critiques, I'm always like, "Wow. This is a thing that people engage in, this is amazing." I know from talking to people who've been to art school that it's also laden and with all kinds of oppressive structures and yuckiness too. But still, when I see critiques happen, I'm just blown away that this is the thing that is a practice in parts of our society, or formalized parts of our society. What does being critical or asking hard questions look like and actually lovingly press on somebody's ideas in a way that they can hear? I've learned a lot from the collective about how that can be done. The people that I love and appreciate the most in terms of their ability to do this artfully are very subtle and careful. I see that a lot in the collective or at least what it looks like.

PCV: *James Baldwin⁵⁶ wrote about love in the way that it can sustain the difficulty of the labor and also the support and the feedback. Because we love one another, because we love this work,*

⁵⁶ Baldwin, 1962.

there is this ability to be able to come back with loving feedback or loving critique or a loving disruption of perhaps things that we disagree with. This work is fueled by love for one another.

KBR: Yeah, it also reminds me of Miriam Kaba, she says, “hope is a discipline.”⁵⁷ It's a practice that we have to work at, and I guess what I'm saying is that I'm on a learning curve. I think that we are amazing at putting love first in our decision making about how we do things and how we spend time together and how we talk to each other. And I think that is actually part of the world building. It's part of what we all as a society, I think, need to learn about how to sustain and reciprocate anything. It feels just so elemental. But on the other hand, I'm also wondering can we deepen and widen our idea of love?

PCV: *I think this is rad, in terms of thinking about the other side of love as a catalyst. What does the collective do to generate more of this focus on the generative possibilities of love?*

KBR: The obvious thing to me is that [love is] not monetizable you know, it's not quantifiable or are sellable. And the collective does our work for free. Well, we're not opposed to being paid for things, but basically we do this work because we love the work and love working with each other and the movements that we're working with.

PCV: *Thank you. In terms of thinking about how this work translates to other spaces and vice versa, whether it's family, home, workspace, a school space, or other kinds of social and professional spaces, what are the manifestations of being with that extend beyond built communities? And here I'm thinking about the collective as our built or established community.*

⁵⁷ Kaba, 2021.

KBR: I think that the ways of relating that I've learned and practiced in the collective have really influenced my approach to my work, my paid work. Spaces to communicate in a way that's more subtle or organic, or let things come up, surface, in their own way, rather than trying to force it into being. That really comes through in my work. And then the aspect of community care is something that's symbiotic between what I'm trying to do at Firebird and what [we do] in the collective. [I'm also] thinking about doing less and being present through a process, embracing that things can take long and lots of conversation, and move in that cyclical cyclone way that I was describing earlier.

The collective can't be everything everyone needs for everyone. It's not that it's the panacea for everything, but this is such a resource. We should be able to help each other with [life] things, too. And I think we do, but in moments where there are big life things, and [it hasn't come up] in the group, I'm sort of like, "Oh, is that just because this is not the space that someone needed? Or is it because we are carrying the ideas of shame or what's okay, and not okay to experience. All of those things [surface in] this work too, in these relationships too?" That's a thing that I noticed and wonder about, and wonder if we can do even better with?

PCV: *I think maybe perhaps for me, the collective, at least our weekly Zoom calls, became like a joyful, happy space that I needed outside of the reality of the heaviness of the pandemic. And I wonder if maybe there are parallels for others. Rather than allowing that space to also be a container for everything else. But then where is the fluidity between it can be joyful when we need but also be a space to hold and support when needed? It doesn't have to be only one thing all of the time.*

KBR: It's just one example, for me, where it's about trying to figure out how to be in relationship with somebody on the side [outside of the collective] also, you know. I have that with some people, and I don't yet with others, and I would love to have more of that, you know. So, I think that's an interesting way to think about the evolution of other pieces of relationships within the collective too.

PCV: *The last question is, how do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

KBR: What came to mind as you're talking was, things moving at the speed of trust.⁵⁸ I feel like we're all protective, but not exclusive. We already have a track record of working through hard things and crying together. It's already acknowledged, it's in the air, that wholeness. We're really respectful of that work and the time that it takes. We're lucky that for most of us it happened without our noticing or trying because we were trying to do something else. Which almost makes me think like, if we want to bring new people in, we have to go back to a little bit of a work cycle and produce stuff. We may have to decenter building trust in quotes, because it's not something you can make happen.

PCV: *Thank you so much, is there anything else you want to add or mention that we haven't covered?*

KBR: I think the only thing that I want to underline is that I think the labor that you're doing and what you're inserting into this collective right now is a huge piece of what I'm calling the world

⁵⁸ brown, 2017.

building or sort of giving shape to whatever it is that we're doing, even when it seems like we're not doing, if that makes sense.

Nicole Marroquin

Figure 23.

Members of the Chicago ACT Collective Preparing Garments to Tie-Dye



Note. Members of the Chicago ACT Collective gathered during the summer of 2021 to learn the ice dye method. Every member received a personalized tie-dyed hoodie printed with the ACT Collective logo. We mailed dyed hoodies to members who live out of state.

Nicole Marroquin (NM): I'm Nicole Marroquin. I'm also in the biz, like you. God, how long have I known you? Almost 15 years? I met you at the Little Village Lawndale High School.⁵⁹

Paulina Camacho Valencia (PCV): *We met in 2008.*

NM: Yep, 14 years.

PCV: *Long time. What do you mean you're "in the biz"?*

NM: I'm chair of the Department of Art Education at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, tenured faculty. You know, teaching, doing other research, making art, continuously, parenting. Got two kids. I'm into history, recent history, and doing the work of history, making it, the result of all the work that I do. I was just thinking about how the last 25 years of my life have been pointing towards the same thing, and everything is aligned. I feel good about it. When things start to fall out of alignment is when I start to get anxious and start messing around and doing things I probably shouldn't. Everything is headed towards curriculum, which is one reason that I'm not writing the books, I'm trying to figure out how to get many things into the places where they matter. What do we need in classrooms? We need a lot of different things. That's continuously what I've been working towards, getting the history of youth movements, and particularly, the visual culture around them, into the hands of young people so that they can act on them. And also, to bring back our shared cultural history of Chicago, and to actually re-inject youth power movements and youth-led social change movements, and also women of color in leadership, back into the history, which is the stuff that gets written out first.

⁵⁹ Nicole and I met while I worked as a Resource Coordinator for the community-based non-profit organization, Enlace Chicago. I managed community programming for the four high schools at the Little Village Lawndale High School Campus located on the west side of the Little Village neighborhood in Chicago.

PCV: *Awesome, thank you. And then you are also a member of the Chicago ACT Collective. Can you describe the Chicago ACT Collective and how you see yourself within the structure of the collective?*

NM: To describe the collective, it's like activism. I noticed everybody in it are art educators and are coming from a whole bunch of different angles but at the same time it's really unified under the umbrella of taking action and being the change you want to see, instead of just drinking coffee and talking about it. As a group, the people adopt a lot of the strategies that activist groups would take, except that everybody in the group is also an artist, and in the arts, so then everybody can actually make the stuff themselves. This stuff being graphics, posters, and banners, and so on. Every individual in the group is connected to their own sort of scenes, whether it be through their art, education, or other work. People are coming from all of these different angles and working in a range of different capacities so that they bring all the richness of their affiliations into a central place. The thing that endears me to this group, I don't even know if we've ever talked about this, it's just people respecting each other. It's really obvious that people are really interested in each other and really do respect each other and really do feel things are richer when everybody's there. People genuinely like each other, so it's not like a work group. Before radical resting was a thing, people were definitely planning recreational outings. This practice seems as if it's a kind of service to each other and a form of radical community care as opposed to self-care. How can we care for all of us together? How can we attend to the needs of other folks, by doing these things that we do together which is, turning up for so and so's cause that they brought up? Or showing up for this recreational outing that is not about accomplishing things. It's not so bound to capitalist stuff and it also includes whole families.

Kids aren't separated out. I'm not saying there are teenagers in the group. They don't always want to be around, but every one of them has been. They know that they've got other aunties, which is really crucial because, in real life, I need a lot of people. It does take a ton of people to bring kids up, and it can't just be on parents. You need other people that are cool. You need a sort of extended family because we aren't all living in our compounds with our relatives as we did for generations, even recently.

PCV: *Not yet, but we're working on our collective compound. So, the first question is, what can an artist collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change?*

NM: You know, there's another major overlap with almost everybody. It just kind of by default happened is Telpochcalli⁶⁰ is this major center of everybody's lives. The way that place works, everybody's well-being is considered equally. For the tianguis⁶¹ students weren't putting their names on the work. And I was like, "Why aren't people putting their names on the work?" They were like, "Because it's for everybody." I thought about it constantly for years. I could not stop thinking about all these little babies making all this stuff and not putting their names on it, which banded into my training as an art educator. Then, of course, the kids go to the tianguis and all of the students are given a quarter and they buy their work anyway. Every kid has a gift for their parents, everybody's making all this work, all the parents are volunteering and coming in to help

⁶⁰ Telpochcalli School is a small elementary school located in the Little Village neighborhood located on the near-west side of Chicago. Many members of the Chicago ACT Collective have close ties to this school as parents of students, members of the Local School Council, as teachers, teaching-artists, student teachers, and community supporters.

⁶¹ Telpochcalli organizes an annual tianguis in the style of open-air markets typically found throughout Mexico and Central America. This is a fund raiser for the school and students contribute and sell artwork.

make the work, and the community comes out. All these different structures exist within that building. It's TCEP⁶² too, Telpochcalli is not just a school, they offer wraparound services. It's a community and social center for parents. There was also the S.I.T.Y. Ollin⁶³ group Henry⁶⁴ was a part of. I met teens there, maybe you were at that thing too, but I didn't know you then. I went to a teen event where they watched *The End of the Nightstick*⁶⁵ on a Friday and these teens were fired the fuck up. I was like, "Oh my god. You're coming out here on a Friday and you're talking about fuck the police." They had such an intensely sophisticated political analysis and they saw themselves in the struggle. I was like, "Wait, this is at night. They're doing stuff at the school during the day, they're doing stuff on weekends. There are mom's doing fitness and taking classes." This school is the manifestation of the philosophy of community and consideration for everybody's well-being. This also comes from the small schools' philosophies and Deb Meier.⁶⁶ If all the teachers can't fit around a table, then you're too big because we can't let anybody fall through the cracks. That's the point. You need somebody who's calling and seeing how you're doing. There's also a lot of parent empowerment. I told you about the time I was at the LSC⁶⁷ meeting, and a parent who you know came and said, "Well, this is our safety phone chain, for if anyone gets snatched by ICE.⁶⁸ This is how people will know to pick up each other's kids."

⁶² TCEP is the Telpochcalli Community Education Project. They are a social justice nonprofit organization housed within the Telpochcalli School (n. d.).

⁶³ S.I.T.Y. (Stop Ignoring the Youth) Ollin, now Ollin Youth, is the youth program of TCEP

⁶⁴ Henry Cervantes was the former Youth Organizer for S.I.T.Y. Ollin.

⁶⁵ Kuttner et al., 1994.

⁶⁶ Deborah Meier is an educator considered to be the founder of the small-school movement (Meier, n. d.) which Telpochcalli School is modeled after.

⁶⁷ The Local School Councils (LSC) "serve as a governing body for each district-managed school in the Chicago Public School (CPS) system" (Chicago Public Schools, n. d.). They were officially instituted in the early 1990s after numerous years of community protest. The LSC is comprised of parents, students, teachers, non-teacher school staff, and community members along with the school principal. The LSC helps make budgetary and policy decisions and conducts principal evaluations.

⁶⁸ ICE is the abbreviation for the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

School is that serious. It's really changed the way I think about what we owe each other, and how to participate. Telpochcalli has been a really unique model.

PCV: *What I hear you saying here is echoing something that we were talking about earlier in our conversation before recording, I think you were talking about how structures of collectivity are necessary for survival. Telpochcalli is one manifestation through an institutionalized form that has allowed malleability to become this model that you're talking about with multiple levels of wraparound services and openings for this work. What are other iterations of this example of being or becoming stronger because we are all stronger collectively?*

NM: I think Telpochcalli has always looked broadly at cultures and been very inviting of parents to bring in their home culture. This is not a scientific analysis, I didn't gather any sort of samples, but I'm on my second kid going through the school, so this is what I've noticed. You get to know people pretty freaking well, and it's a different landscape at the school now than it was back then. But there's people coming from the places we were talking about before the recording, these little tiny towns where people really do rely on each other. You don't have other ways of doing things. Not knowing your neighbors is not really an option. You don't gotta like everybody, but you figure out how to deal with it and you come up with agreements. It's not just some weird funky nostalgia or some projected idea of what things used to be either. People really do come out for each other in ways that are really pretty remarkable at that school, but also like in this collective structure. The families at Telpochcalli put themselves out in front and around justice issues. I think that's also one of the things about this collective and the overlap with Telpochcalli.

I also think collectives, including art collectives, are the norm in Latin America. People do work together in art collectives historically and currently in Latin America for sure. That's

where I really got a face-full of it, digging into contemporary art when I've had a chance to live in Mexico for a couple of months. It's not all about the individual artists making their shit and becoming an art star, because for the artists I met with, that is not the only goal. There are far better and more sustainable ways of being an artist. Being in a collective is another way to be better together.

PCV: *How do you think that love can function as a catalyst for sustaining reciprocal teaching and learning?*

NM: On a practical side, and speaking as a triple Aquarian, if I don't want to do something, I'm not going to do it. I gotta have a serious motivation to want to do anything. It's so much work to teach and to be in the arts and to be involved in education that you really do honestly need a support network. It's not common to find people that are that passionate about all of these things, who also want to build community, because we are the busiest people. I don't know of anything that I would ever want to do, that I would make time to do, people that I would make time to be around, if I didn't love them. If I'm gonna want to do stuff, I've got to be getting things from it, too, including feeling supported, feeling seen, and being able to be my whole self. How many places can I do that? There are not that many kinds of people you get to do that with. There are not that many opportunities to have all of this at once. It's really different than having like a friend clique or a scene or whatever.

PCV: *What would you say to people who are perhaps not already attuned to love's generative possibilities?*

NM: When I did my job talk I talked about the pedagogy of love. I talked about the radical and transformative possibilities, potentials of love in school settings. I'm talking about the power of it in a place where children really are, it's like you flip a switch on with young people when you are fully tuned into what they're doing and saying, you open up a whole world. When you're in a school where all the teachers are doing this it's like this finely tuned instrument. That's really an incredible experience. Or teaching with a handful of folks that are doing that kind of work and then seeing the outcome. It pays off, in a way. That's even the wrong kind of way to describe it, because it's outside of money. It's like a reason to get up and do stuff. Why do you think teachers put up with garbage like being paid like shit and disrespect? This work is a passion, it's an art, and it's a part of this big democracy project. You can only get anywhere with teaching and art when you love it. By get anywhere, I mean, experience satisfaction, feel accomplished, be happy, want to keep going, and if your goal is arming the revolutionaries or whatever, that you set and can reach your goals. Obviously it's not the only thing you need.

PCV: *So then, what are the manifestations of being with that extend beyond built communities? With this question I'm thinking about what are the principles, values, ideas, experiences that we have formed within the collective that perhaps extend beyond the structure of the collective?*

NM: I think this is what we started talking about earlier, there's the stuff that everybody's bringing in and then there's the stuff that happens within that then comes out, but then there's stuff that some people were doing before, and then it all enriches everybody's experience. All the expertise or the trust that can happen when you can ask, "Is this a stupid idea?" It would be really fun to diagram. I think it would be really useful to build a sort of a graphic around this. Even

though it might have a negative result because this is definitely not about ranking. There's such a desire for evenness and for regarding everybody equally.

PCV: *Can you speak a little bit more than about how trust can be developed? How do we enable trust?*

NM: It's spending time with people, sitting around, and hanging out and putting in the hours. But you want to put them in. Trust also comes from people helping each other out and growing with each other over time. When people feel supported they can then put out more of that, can then turn around and respond with even more energy. Its sort of like when you're making music, you have to be listening to it, right? Or like when you're writing, if you're not reading enough, you can tell you aren't reading enough. It's really hard to write but you have to balance it, and you can't just get stuck reading. Then you pick up the voice of the other people that you're reading, like the intensity, pacing, or vocab. I think it's the same, you have to be doing the work with people in order to be able to then go out and do it on your own. Then you're not just out there on your own doing it when you are on your own. You're doing it with all these people behind you.

PCV: *With a really rad group of people who love you and will hold you through that process.*

NM: Yeah, who will also tell you when you're full of shit, which is important. There are not that many people you can do that with.

PCV: *What you were saying earlier about having people who will also be like, "No, homie, that's not it." I think that's that other side of love, too, right?*

NM: The year that bell hooks⁶⁹ book came out I ran and bought it because I had abusive people in my life. I always have in some way or another, and I have been abusive, too. The definition of love that I got from bell hooks⁷⁰ is that love is my support for you doing what you want to do, the way you want to do it. Love is not me trying to control you or your desires, not me projecting my wishes onto it, but rather supporting you as you are with the things that you would like to accomplish. My support helps you get there. If at any time I'm standing in the way that is not love, that might be possessiveness, or any number of other kinds of abuse. That's a lifelong lesson, too. It's easy to put into words but it gets a lot more complicated to live it.

PCV: *My last question for now is, how can we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

NM: I think with the ACT Collective there are public facing things and then there are recreational relaxing things, time that is about caring for each other. That's what enables the other kind of work to be done. We really make time to relax and to just see each other. Otherwise, the work can't happen together. It's not that carefully defined too, what's social and then what's the work. You can't really separate that stuff, but it's fine, because you don't have to. This is me sort of defining the ACT collective a little bit more, but it's also a kind of scene where you can talk about teaching without people being like, "Ho hum, what a bore," because people don't always want to talk about that or to think about it. With this group you're just as likely to end up on a tangent talking about something unrelated to teaching as you are to exchange articles. It's not a contest. I don't know, it's hard to define, but I think that's good. I don't think it

⁶⁹ hooks, 1999.

⁷⁰ hooks, 1999.

should be super well-defined. It's about not being held to a structure. But then at the same time people do check in with each other so that people aren't just completely freewheeling. I think that's another really important part of it. I also don't think it should be fixed. I think anything that is staying the same, or anybody trying to control things is like a red flag, that's where you fall into problems. The collective will live and do well with or without a firm definition. There are not that many things in life that have that freedom, and especially in the lives of the people in this particular collective. So many members have to work within really fucking restrictive structures that are difficult, with many boundaries, rules, and bosses, which are not ideal environments for generating ideas or solving problems. Everybody's struggling against the grain and fighting. You don't want to experience that then replicate that when you are with your comrades in the struggle. We've built a third space.⁷¹

⁷¹ Bhabha, 2004.

Amanda Cortés

Figure 24.

Photocollage by Amanda Cortés



Note. Image courtesy of Amanda Cortés.

Water on Fire

If I could light a match and turn the waters on fire,
I would swim lifetimes with you by my side trying
and re-trying to get it right.

We would dive deep into bottomless lakes,
holding hands as the currents circled around us.

We would float side by side on the surface,
while looking up at the sky, breathing into life
knowing that we'd been here before.

I would sit with you on the shore, our feet digging into the sand
as we listened to the birds say goodbye to the sun.

My oldest friend, my water on fire.

(Cortés, personal communication, 2022)

Amanda included the following statement:

A handful of life events have left discernible "before and after" markers in my life. Becoming a mother during the pandemic and uprisings in Minneapolis was one of them, and becoming a part of the Chicago ACT Collective is another.

In July 2020, after five months of pregnancy in quarantine and isolation with only Eric for company, meeting the collective for a camping trip in Wisconsin(?) was like medicine for my heart, my spirit and my womb. At first seeing everyone was overwhelming but as soon as Eric and Karen lit the campfire that night, I was home with my people. Eric and I didn't know it then, but a round of "The Name Game" so wild that the forest ranger came to tell us nerds to keep it down, would help us choose our baby's name.

We also didn't know that our fellow collective members (do we call ourselves that?) were in the middle of making us a gift that we would receive months later once Sixto Fidel García-Cortés arrived on this earthly plane, while the pandemic raged on. The quilt pictured in my piece, which also inspired my poem, is the collective work of hands, hearts and minds. It arrived, hand delivered to our apartment in Minneapolis during a time of literal and figurative postpartum darkness. Receiving the quilt and the beautiful video that documented it's making was a halo of light in the darkness for me. I remember telling myself out loud that I would live in the light of that halo and find strength in it. This quilt is a literal blanket of love that Sixto, Eric and I lay on and cover ourselves with day and night. In so many ways, my coming into parenthood is inextricably tied to the Chicago ACT Collective. Each of us gives life in our own way, every day. I have gratitude for all of the ways we have come together to center love, mutual respect, curiosity, justice and support for one another. (Cortés, personal communication, 2022)

Amanda Cortés (AC): I am Amanda Cortés. Oh, my goodness, how do I introduce myself? I guess now that I don't live in Chicago, I always have to say I was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, on the southwest side. And I have always navigated spaces that are Mexicano, primarily immigrant working-class. I am the child of immigrants from Mexico, who met in the states, and their way of being in this world shaped a lot of my upbringing. [My parents] were both activists and cultural organizers. My dad is now retired, he was a member of a co-op printing press, that shaped a lot of who I was growing up. My mom was a second and third-grade bilingual teacher before she retired from the Chicago Public Schools, pretty much in our same neighborhood, which also shaped who I am. I am a sister to two amazing human beings who have saved my life, more times than I can count in the last couple of years, they're incredible. They're my role models. I'm a mom now, and I am a partner to an amazing, amazing artist. We've started forming our own family. But even saying that doesn't make sense, because we're part of so many overlapping and concentric circles of families. So, we're part of communities in Chicago, Minneapolis, and also the Southwest.

Paulina Camacho Valencia (PCV): *Can you describe the Chicago ACT collective and how you see yourself fitting into the larger structure of the collective?*

AC: It has become family. I don't know that any of us intended that it would become such a part of our existence, kind of in response to and rejection of work. To me, we have become a self-care collective. We make things in response to social movements and those sorts of necessities, and for the most part, those [replies] are visual in nature. That's really how we started, with the idea to make posters, banners, graphics, things like that for social movements in Chicago. And then I think somewhere along the way, we all realized that we needed friendship. We needed

family. And we kind of intentionally rejected institutionalization. I feel like we made some really conscious decisions really early on to not be a sort of traditional institution and that we are going to be a collective and not be a 501(c)3 or whatever other iteration. This existence is what helped define us so that this didn't turn into work. We do [make] things that have an "output" when enough folks say that we want to work on them and are able to produce them. But I think a lot of our work, *entre comillas*, has become not working. AKA, taking a break. I think the people who are in this collective are really, really hard workers in so many other spheres of their lives.

I think we're just there for each other. I feel like we're Captain Planet.⁷² We unite all of our rings when one of us needs something like, some kind of emotional, or logistical, or practical, or just, you know, whatever needs like a hug, a virtual hug in these times. But we all unite our little rings, and we become something that's bigger than the sum of our parts.

PCV: *I love that. And how do you see yourself within the collective?*

AC: I always feel like the slacker member. I actually inserted myself into this collective. I was not an initial invitee via the very first convening. I remember, Eric and I were in his studio at the Hyde Park Art Center and William and Sarah came in, and they started talking to him. They said, "Oh, well, you know, we are going to form this group, we really want you to be part of it, you should come." And I had seen William from afar for so long, and just never had the courage I guess, to go up to him be like, "Hey, you know my friends, I know your friends, and I want to be friends." So, I kind of did that. And I said, "Well, I know you're not inviting me, but I'm coming

⁷² Amanda was referring to the animated television series *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* (Hayward et al., 1990-1996).

to your meeting and here's my email. And I don't want to just come as Eric's partner, I want to come as me.”

PCV: *That's amazing! Really quickly though, going back to something that you mentioned, when you were describing the collective, you noted that as part of our formation, and early decisions, there was a firm rejection of institutionalization. I wonder if you can point to an example.*

AC: Yes, because I felt a certain type of way about when it happened. We were meeting in Karen and Eric's first-floor meeting space where we've made a lot of the physical work and we held meetings. We had been approached through William, by someone at a university who wanted us to engage in some collaborative project making with them. [The project] was going to be grant-based, and we were going to receive money for it, and we were gonna have to do certain activities. We had a conversation about it and I was really for it because the kind of work that we were being asked to do I think it was specifically for the Latinx community in Chicago. I can't remember exactly what the project was but it struck me as something important and necessary to do. They were coming to us for a reason. And I remember Karen saying, “But is this what this collective is for? Is that what we want to be? Because” she was like, “I don't want to be that. And I don't want to do more work.” And I was like, “But it's important work.” And I had a lot of feelings about it and, ultimately, as a group, we decided that we weren't going to work on this project. I'm glad that we [made that decision] because I think it would have taken us in a direction that would have created more work. Honestly, I think, to me, that's one of the things that's central to the collective, only doing the things that we feel passionately about, and also things that don't require multi-month or multi-year commitments. I think that's what keeps it

light. And I think that's what's kept the light in the work sense, in the production sense. But it's created the space for us to go deep with each other.

PCV: *I completely forgot about that and now that you're talking about it like I remember when that happened. So, what can the Chicago ACT collective teach us about disrupting individualism and harnessing the power of community for social change?*

AC: I think what I just talked about, the decision to not go in a direction that would institutionalize us is one example. At that moment, I had a really sort of individualistic response, I wanted this, and I wanted everyone else to want it. The majority of us didn't, and so, just having to go through that exercise. The work that we ended up doing is a practice of self-care and sometimes we produce things for social movements. I think just that act can show people that not everything has to be about production. Sometimes social change comes from care and from resistance to these traditional notions of production. I think the fact that we do things through consensus, and if you propose an idea and enough people jump on it and want to make it happen, that's how we decide that things get done. That decision-making mode is also acting on your values. And for social change there's no sort of overruling, outranking, you know, it's a sort of togetherness, decision making approach.

I think the fact that we go camping, which is a huge part of the self-care, which is communing with nature, we do it together. Reigniting a relationship with the earth and with each other. That act, I think, is how you achieve social change. The fact that we come together for each other.

We're basically like a committee or a panel for whenever one of us runs into either a personal challenge or a professional opportunity. That has been incredible. When I tell other

people what we do for each other, it's just like, "Wow." I mean, that's like old-school community, I think it really is a throwback to the way that humans used to live life. We can just rely on each other. I mean, you came to help us with Sixto.⁷³ I've come to the collective with so many questions about parenting when I've needed help, and the love that's expressed, what people offer as a community. You all made us a quilt that you all hand-printed and sewed on a camping trip, and then sent it to us with a video. That coming together, for me, in the middle of a pandemic, when we were alone and isolated was, I mean, I felt loved in ways that I didn't know was possible. Honestly, it was therapy, if you really want to get down to it. I think that acknowledging that therapy and healing is part of social change is a big thing and that therapy is not always just like talk therapy. It's really important to be able to talk through problems with a professional, but I think a lot of therapy and social change happens in community and not alone. And so the healing that you all gave me at that moment, was, I can never, I don't think I could ever articulate how much that meant. And I have that blanket on my bed and I sleep with it every night.

PCV: *That's such a wonderful example of love as this important and powerful force. And so my second question is, how can love function as a catalyst for sustained and reciprocal teaching and learning? I'm thinking about love, and all of its manifestations, as a way to support and sustain teaching and learning, but also as another kind of catalyst for continued work toward social change. That work and change are never fully achieved, it becomes an ongoing process that we engage.*

⁷³ I drove to Minneapolis, MN during the summer of 2021 to help Amanda & García prepare for their move to New Mexico.

AC: Love is something that you can take out into the streets and manifest your support or disdain for something that our government is doing. That also has to translate to your home and your personal life. I think that, because of the generation that I learned from, which was my parent's generation, like, post-Civil Rights, during the 60s and 70s, they railed very vocally and externally about things that they saw governments doing that were unjust, and rightly so. But I think a lot of the things that they were fighting against were so deeply rooted and ingrained in the way that they treated each other as humans, as family. They perpetrated a lot of the same harms that they tried to fight against, against each other. As a parent, that's one of the most tragic things that I could ever have characterized happening to the generation before me. And honestly, it's been one of the things that I've committed to disrupting. I think that's why our collective, that's why we act the way we do. How can we enact that kind of existence, so that we are learning things we maybe didn't previously learn? I'll speak for myself, things we didn't learn and then also teaching, you know, the next generation, our peers, through the way that we act, how justice should be done.

PCV: *I'm with you. I think that for me, and why I think I'm writing about us is because I do feel that the collective has taught me a lot about love as a catalyst. I get teary because all of the things that you're saying resonate so profoundly and loudly. Doing this work with each other for ourselves and for one another is really important. The next question is what are the manifestations of being with that extend beyond built communities? With this question I'm asking, are there aspects or components of our being with together, as a collective, that extend into other aspects of your life, whether it's family work, other projects? How, how does that function, does it function? And if so, how?*

AC: It functions. I'm always talking about our collective whenever I get into dream spaces with people. Let's say I'm on a panel or something like that and people are like, "Hey, let's dream big. What would it be if it could be our ultimate..." I'm always like, "I'm part of this collective. We go camping, and we engage in self-care, and we talk about love." It definitely extends beyond. I don't know that I'm going back to Chicago anytime soon. That hurts my soul. And at the same time, I'm always thinking, how can I build something similar to what we have in whatever space that I'm in? How can I enact that sort of community that we have in another space? And I think it really, at the core of it, is really deep sort of friendship that we know we don't have to know every single little detail about each other's lives. But we know that when we need to be there for each other we will. I think, honestly, we've built like an old school village through a new school sort of existence. We're just trying to do the best that we can and sort of work against late-stage capitalism.

PCV: *Until we can officially fund our compound.*

AC: Yeah, totally. I think one of the hardest parts that I think I've had with what we're doing is sharing, sharing our I don't even know how to put it. I feel so safe and warm and comfortable with everyone that letting other folks in feels scary.

PCV: *That leads us to the next question, how do we understand the exclusivity and porosity of collective structures?*

AC: I think my fear is rooted in loss of what we have cultivated. At the same time, clearly, I have misgivings about being exclusive because I think what we've cultivated could help other people, could be shared in ways that go back to your first question and harness the power of

community for social change. How do we continue our existence, while also, I don't even want to call it exclusivity, but I guess that is what it is at the end of the day, so that we are porous enough so that other people can engage with the work that we do, which is really, I think, love-based. So that others can enact it in whatever sort of group they want to form or are already part of. There are all different kinds of collectives. I think we just happen to be an anti-capitalist no work one. I feel that when William would take out his art cart, and we would participate as a collective in printing things and the folks that we got to know through that and giving away those prints, that sort of interaction, to me, had more long-lasting relationships and demonstrations of what a collective is than maybe an exhibition. Those are really hands on community workshops.

Ivan Arenas

Figure 25.

On the Table⁷⁴ Gathering



Note. Members of the Chicago ACT Collective met to engage in conversation and plan future projects. Image courtesy of Paulina Camacho Valencia.

⁷⁴ On the Table (n. d.) is an initiative of The Chicago Community Trust intended to engage city residents in conversations around pressing and pertinent local needs.

Ivan submitted the following statement:

Making Collective Futures Beyond the Dreamworks of Racial Capitalism

The interrelated legacies of racism and capitalism have made the United States a country of stark contrasts where neighborhoods of million-dollar homes can be found less than a mile from homeless encampments. In Chicago, decades of redlining and racial residential segregation have meant that predominantly white North side neighborhoods have flourished while predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhoods on the South and West sides have been shaped by either structural disinvestment or by increasing gentrification.

Marginalized Chicagoans are not passive spectators to the violence of racial capitalism, however, and have a long history of mobilizing to demand change. And yet, as was evident after the uprising following the police murder of George Floyd, when Black and Latinx residents have mobilized and taken to the streets to call for justice, they are met by militarized police forces.

Whether in times of crisis or of calm, militarized police forces enforce racial boundaries throughout the city, further cementing zones of opportunity and of exclusion. State violence not only shapes and delineates the dividing line between thriving communities and spaces of survival in cities like Chicago but, in enforcing those boundaries, it also actively divides and fractures the spaces where solidarity and common struggle can grow.

State violence is critical in ensuring and protecting the profits of racial capitalism. Moreover, militarism and surveillance over the streets also protect, police, and ensure space for the dreamworks of capitalism — the pervasive advertising that covers our cities and cyberspace, leaving little room for alternative expressions. From billboards, city walls, and buses to private homes and cars, the physical infrastructure of our lives has become ad-space available for hire.

The previous refuge that the interior of our homes offered has been colonized by advertisements that filter into every corner of our lives through screens on devices that we have all become addicted to.

The financial incentives of a mass media market driven by advertising means that, when the dreamworks of capitalism aren't offering everyone weapons of mass distraction, they are further inciting distrust and division. The net effect of racial segregation, the safeguarding of capitalism by militarized policing, a scarcity of opportunities in Black and Latinx communities, and the saturation of a mass media environment that either feeds distraction or fuels outrage is that we live in segregated silos and lack outlets for democratic debate.

In this context, coming together with others to form an art collective is a radical act. The eighteen or so of us gathered together on a cold day in January of 2016, each with our own opinions, politics, problems, and art practices, could not have foreseen that we would become the Chicago ACT Collective, but we were united in a shared sense of political alienation from the political powerbrokers making decisions that affected our communities and by social frustration at the growing racial inequities that we saw in Chicago.

The shared desire for change was a good starting point, but it was only by working together and making art of protest that this collection of individuals was able to find bonds of solidarity and become a collective. Throughout the past six years, it has been the process of coming together to decide on what projects to undertake and then working on those projects together have enabled the group to forge powerful social bonds that go beyond aesthetic or political expression. The Chicago ACT Collective could have dissolved as quickly as it came together. It did not. Instead, it has flourished because we do not have any leaders or a roadmap for the

future. Rather, we rely on the active participation of members of the group, each with our own opinions, habits, politics, and problems to guide the collective's motion.

Perhaps more so than any other means of production, art in Western society is an exemplar of the principle of capitalist individualism. The lucrative valuation of artworks depends on cultivating the mythology of the artist as lone genius and in largely pulling art out of our social and political context to set them aside in museums that charge a sizeable fee to enter and that display them as examples of the epitome of creative expression. In contrast, the art of the Chicago Act Collective lacks a signature, is most often reproducible and created to be reproduced, is free to take and is meant to be placed on city walls for all to see. Moreover, much of the reproductions of ACT Collective works are done in workshops where the public attending are active participants rather than passive spectators. Produced collectively and free for everyone to enjoy, Chicago ACT Collective images offer a stark contrast to the insular character of the art market, its cult of artists, and the commercialization of politics and culture.

As a reproducible image that does not seek to sell a product and that does not pay for the use of public space, Chicago ACT Collective images also offer a stark contrast to the pervasive advertising that forms the wallpaper of our cities. In our society, the only permissible public in public space is a consumer public whose democratic slogan might be "no politics, just purchase please." Violence, our complacency (or apathy) in voting, weapons of mass-distraction, and our participation through purchase ensures the efficacy of the dreamworks of capitalist democracy and its project to sell us goods as the good life itself. Most often, the reasons to believe in a better world are filtered through a narrow lens that equates happiness with purchase. As with many other groups that have come before us, the art of the Chicago ACT Collective responds by

decolonizing desire, reminding us that love is revolutionary and a legacy of the solidarity of collective struggle.

Chicago ACT Collective images are an invitation for people to reclaim our right to define alternative visions of the good life. The global discourse of democratic public space and capitalist consumer utopias glosses over the production of cities of walls with ever shrinking public spaces and publics. Art placed on city walls resist the privatization of public space and attempts to constitute the streets of the city as spaces of debate. Most importantly, however, the art of protest goes further than simply exposing the contradictions of a democratic and capitalist economic order secured through violence. Art placed on the street constitutes an important political act not only because it defies the art market, privatization of public space, and the commercialization of culture, but precisely because it is an act of creation.

Collective art making and art placed on city walls reminds people that they have the right to manifest their opinion and thereby participate in a shared dialogue about our collective future. Artistic interventions in Chicago's public space certainly remind marginalized Chicagoans of a long history of everyday suffering. On the one hand, these images point to the systemic nature of marginalization under racial capitalism. On the other hand, they also speak to people's courage in mobilizing to find a solution. The art of protest on city walls denounces our authoritarian politics and our systemic problems of economic injustice, patriarchy, and racism. It also holds up a mirror where those that pass by can find their sentiments and thoughts reflected in the images — their problems, demands, desires and hopeful aspirations.

The collective art practices and shared governance of groups like the Chicago ACT Collective offer a direct challenge to a world where city residents and our planet are in the service of a

consumer economy from which elites and the government profit but which has impoverished the vast majority. In these past six years, what I have seen is that, by bringing people together, our art of protest develops people's creative capacities and that, once mobilized, people find that creativity is itself a generative political practice.

The Chicago ACT Collective is radically connected in a creative search for alternative futures; we are actively seeking to reclaim people's right to define an alternative vision of the good life rooted in local experiences and the engaged perspectives and politics of direct debate and collective participation. Our collective struggle has transformed alienated individuals into empowered actors. Yet, the most enduring lesson and legacy of the Chicago ACT Collective will not be a series of images calling for radical futures. The most radical and transformative act of the collective is in the friendships that have arisen through long conversations in the days we are making art or are huddled together around a campfire under a night sky. Collective art practices have produced a shared and visceral sense of togetherness that has given rise to new social networks and a community in struggle. We know that brighter futures are ahead, not because we can see or believe that racial capitalism is coming to an end anytime soon, but because we have each other. (Arenas, personal communication, 2022)

Rodolfo Esparza

Figure 26.

The Next Generation



Note. This picture was taken during a Chicago ACT Collective camping trip during the spring of 2017. Image courtesy of Rodolfo Esparza.

Rudy submitted the following playlist in response to the research questions.

Figure 27.

Rudy's playlist QR code



Note. Use your cell phone to scan this QR code to listen to Rudy's playlist on the audio streaming platform Spotify.

A Letter About Limitations to the Study

Querides⁷⁵ amigues,⁷⁶

Thank you so much for making space and time to share your important insights on our collective. I deeply appreciate all of your contributions to our collaborative project. I want to share a few reflections on the limitations of the study in hopes that these observations may offer insights for modifications to future researcher.

Upon reflection, I feel as though the method I chose for facilitating the discussions may have hindered more emergent dialogue from surging. Perhaps it was a matter of engaging a slightly different process that is more in line with the research-creation methodology described in a previous letter. It would have been preferable to invite collective members to select one or two questions that felt most intriguing to them, rather than attempt to cover every single question during our time together.

Additionally, I would have benefitted from a more purposeful and intentional commitment to a conversation – even though I thought I had prepared myself for an emergent inquiry process and expressed a desire to engage in conversation, the conversations felt more like interviews than I had hoped. I understand the primary distinction between an interview and a conversation to be the desired goals or outcome. In an interview setting, there is an objective, a gathering of information predicated on a set of questions, and/or a desire to collect pertinent information. The interviewer usually speaks less, and focuses primarily on guiding the interaction or offering clarifying questions. I believe a conversation to be more of an exchange between those involved. A conversation is more open-ended and less goal-oriented. If there are

⁷⁵ See footnote 3.

⁷⁶ See footnote 4.

prepared questions, they serve as openings and not structured guides. Those involved are active participants rather than passive observers or collectors of information. Purposeful conversation should naturally allow for emergence; in comparison, while conversation emerges in an interview format, there is an imposition that the interview itself imposes methodologically. I realize now that my approach to the conversations was rooted in parallels to the interview method, and that I should have approached the conversations differently to allow the emergence of more natural, less-structured conversations to unfold. This was a missed opportunity, but it also served as an important lesson.

Each interaction with participating collective members was slightly different. While reviewing the recordings, I noticed that some discussions felt more like conversations with an exchange of ideas, while others felt more like interviews because I purposefully held back in sharing my own thoughts and focused on simply asking questions. I should have been more consistent about intentionally leaning into the conversation and allowing myself to be a more active participant, while still measuring my contribution so as not to overshadow my guests. During the process of holding these conversations, I found myself questioning my participation in the discussion and attempting to assume a more impartial stance. In a few recordings, I even stopped myself from finishing a comment by stating that my role was to listen and observe. I found it surprising how institutional structures are so deeply embedded and manifest often in unexpected ways. In spite of my awareness of and dedication to emergent and iterative processes, the pressure to perform research through previously defined parameters impacted my study. This compulsion was not imposed by my dissertation committee or members of the collective. I simply reverted to this form based on my own insecurities as a novice researcher.

One additional revision I would make would be to edit the third research question listed above: What are the manifestations of being-with that extend beyond built communities? Every person who participated in the discussions required more contextualization regarding this question. I may have been overly ambitious by trying to fit too much into it and envisioning it doing more than it could. I conceptualized the question pointing to two similar but distinctly different things. I wanted to leave space to inquire about the networked constellation of relational dynamics that exist within the collective that perhaps predated the formation of the group and/or that extends beyond it. I also wanted to understand the most impactful values, modes of being with one another, and perspectives that we translate to other spaces and interactions outside of the collective. These two strands tethered to the same question were not immediately clear to me. As I moved through the conversations, it became clear to me that I was less interested in tracing our relational map and more interested in understanding how the values we have cultivated seep into other spaces and, perhaps, vice versa. Interpersonal relationships are so special and difficult to trace and track, and attempting to formalize a more organic process would inevitably lead to erasure or misinterpretation. Nevertheless, this question, like the others, enabled wonderful and dynamic interactions.

Time constraints and busy schedules may have prevented a more emergent research-creation methodological application. I previously shared ambitious goals for attempting to conduct this project over a short period of time. My enthusiasm overshadowed realistic considerations of your time and availability. In spite of the things that I would change about the process, each interaction was beautiful. I felt like I was being given a gift of time and trust from each participant. Even those who were unable to meet via Zoom offered this gift in other ways. Some folks did both, which was supremely generous.

Thank you for the gift of your time,

Pau

III.

CHAPTER 5: A SERIES OF LETTERS ON OBSERVATIONS & REFLECTIONS FROM CONVERSATIONS WITH THE CHICAGO ACT COLLECTIVE

A Letter About the Process of Analysis

Camarades,⁷⁷

I hope you are still marveling at our collective brilliance, I know I am. I have spent a considerable amount of time listening to your voices, reading your words, and making careful and thoughtful edits to the excerpts from our conversations. I hope that you all feel that your insights and intentions have been adequately captured in this abbreviated form. While the editing process invited input, there is a fair amount of responsibility that I have assumed in putting together a document that meets the requirements of a dissertation. It has been difficult to curate aspects of our conversations into succinct themes or ideas that may be approached as disclosures or revelations of sorts. The assumption that we can ever arrive at a concrete declaration or understanding of most things in this world, and of collectivity in particular, feels disingenuous. I have previously noted that this was not my intention in embarking on this project.

I want to preface the sharing of these common developments by noting two things. First, these so-called findings are not intended to be universal declarations. I see all of the conversations and even the themes I have generated as rhizomatic in nature. In biology, a rhizome is a stem and can function as a nutrient spring for various roots that grow from this source (Biology Online, n. d.). Ginger is an example of a rhizome found in nature. However, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) are careful to explain that the theoretical rhizome they refer to

⁷⁷ See footnote 10.

differs from root structures in multiple ways. Primarily, the three-dimensional web of lines connecting various points do not have a base source or wellspring. As opposed to the biological conceptualization of rhizomes, Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome resists genealogical and linear tracings. My understanding of a rhizome is described by Deleuze and Guattari as a series of lines of connection that may form an open map of sorts. There is no concrete beginning or endpoint, simply a web of three-dimensional connections that may even extend beyond the plane of a singular dimension. These lines of connection illustrate the multiplicity of intersections, openings, and invitations from which to consider the ideas that have surfaced based on my research questions. Deleuze and Guattari state, "Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that it always has multiple entryways" (p. 35). Any member of the collective, or reader, can sit with the conversation excerpts and will most certainly generate an entirely different set of realizations. A multiplicity of connections, findings, and interpretations are all possible within a rhizomatic structure and resists a point of origin. This document reflects one of many elucidations of what can be known and understood about the Chicago ACT Collective.

This brings me to my second point, these topics are based on my perception of the material we generated together. These are not fixed considerations, they are a reflection of my understanding in this present moment. While I arrived at these conclusions through a relational practice, the analysis and evaluation process were taken up by me alone. As a member of the collective, I am in a unique position. I wanted to work from a space of awareness and understanding within the research group. However, I also assume the additional role of researcher. It was my hope that my role as both member and researcher would allow for the strict boundaries of positionality to blur a bit, and they have. Although, ultimately, the limitations of

time have forced me to assume a less collaborative role in terms of the development of a thematic narrative to illustrate our inquiry. I am reassured by the awareness that you all fully trust me and my analysis of this work. I know that this trust has been built over time and predicated on numerous interactions and conversations. However, your trust is part of what makes the labor of curation additionally challenging. I can only ever speak from my position and situatedness. This means that there will inevitably be points or threads of analysis that will be overlooked.

Loveless (2019) addresses this point in a discussion of Lacan's *objet petit a*. In attempting to understand the object of desire, and specifically the desires that prompt or sustain our pedagogical curiosities, Loveless pays attention to the visual structures of anamorphosis or the visual distortion that can be created by optical illusions in a work of art. The Ester Hernández installation at the National Museum of Mexican Art, *Sun Mad (ofrenda dedicated to the artist's father, a farm worker from the San Joaquin Valley, CA)* (1989), is an example of anamorphosis. According to where you stand relative to this piece you can see three different images. The first is a recreation of Hernández's famous *Sun Mad* (1982) print which can be seen by looking at the installation from the center point. If you move to the left of the work an image of a figure, presumably Hernández's father, is made visible. The depicted figure is wearing a denim collared shirt, sombrero, work gloves, and a red bandana wrapped around their face. They are rendered carrying a basket of green grapes and a grape hook knife. The same image of the same figure is visible from the right side of the installation, however the face is replaced by a skull, honoring her father and the countless premature deaths of other farm workers exposed to deadly chemicals.

Loveless (2019) uses the understanding of anamorphosis to create a visual depiction of the awareness that it is impossible to ever see or understand everything at once. Following Lacan's description, Loveless looks at a painting by Hans Holbeins and deduces, "The painting, structured by anamorphic dissonance, insists that the viewer negotiate a multiplicity of positions and recognizes that there is no actual position from which the two legibilities can be seen at once" (pp. 85-89). This awareness allows for a certain degree of understanding that the task of analysis or interpretation is only ever a partial endeavor. Even if we were to attempt to co-author a piece written by our fifteen active members, it would only ever be a partial representation of a layered and complex system of relational being and becoming.

Yet, in spite of this awareness, I don't necessarily feel a sense of relief in my role as researcher or curator of our work. I love each of you profoundly, and I feel a deep sense of responsibility to ensure that I live up to the principles of our work. I also do not want to perpetuate colonial research practices. The cognizance of these structures does not imply that they will not be recreated by myself or others. I do not know that I fully trust or believe in the institutional archive to adequately reflect the scope of our work in ways that will not be flattened or weaponized against us in some near or distant future. I cannot offer assurance that this will not happen. However, I am reminded by the multiplicity of women of color feminists who have paved the way for my own voice and contributions to systems of knowledge – silence only perpetuates further erasure (Lorde, 1984). I would much rather share what we have developed and risk misinterpretation rather than continue to move through the world ignoring the powerful force of collective configurations.

A bit about the process of identifying a few common threads that emerged in our conversations – as I worked on compiling the excerpts of our discussions, I noticed that there

were common themes that were repeatedly addressed across many exchanges. I decided to take notes based on the edited conversations to trace the threads of these emergent topics. One of the things that I found most compelling and equally confusing for me as the curator of these ideas was the way these points of intersection did not necessarily correlate to any particular question or did not emerge in any fixed order. For example, the importance of our camping practice came up frequently but was used to exemplify our collective structure, as an example of how love can serve as a catalyst for reciprocal exchange and continued learning. Camping was also cited as a practice that extends beyond our collective configuration given that we are not exclusive about who we invite to share in this experience. One concept and practice extended across different questions. In this way, you all demonstrated and reaffirmed the rhizomatic nature of our ideas. Additionally, it was clear that the questions that I prepared functioned as opening invitations for conversation. Sure, they helped to contain the number of other topics that may have emerged in a more open conversation format; however, the vastness of responses points to multiple interpretations allowed through the questions. The questions offered anchors or loose parenthetical frames and I hope that they did not feel like strict didactic prompts.

In order to identify the common threads across the various conversations, I reviewed each edited discussion. I took notes on the topics that came up and their relevance to the prompting questions. I wanted to make sure that the topics I selected to further address were reflective of the excerpts of the conversations that have been included in this project. After compiling my notes on one single sheet of paper, I began to draw connecting lines across the various responses. I then organized the responses in groups and arrived at the emergent topics based on the categories. The questions served as guides for conversation but became less important in the configuration of themes. The topics I take up for further discussion are an assemblage of sorts.

They become threads that are woven or braided together for the sake of attempting to compile a narrative. Like the rope-making process, I hope that my analysis allows ample room for the strands to maintain their own integrity and offer further space for exploration and consideration.

I imagine the threads of these conversations to be connecting lines within the rhizomatic web of ideas and concepts we have generated together. The strands or threads may also fray and offer new points of departure from which to consider these ideas or make additional connections. Even though there are countless ways to analyze our conversations, I have curated a collection of ideas that feel most resonant to the task of attempting to understand the power of collectivity. I hope to return to these conversations in the future to continue to learn from our collective brilliance. The letters that follow address a few observations that reflect the tracing of my own path of understanding through our rhizomatic web of rope, braids, and frayed threads.

Thank you for your trust throughout this process. I do not take this work lightly. I also hope that if you identify a point of contention or disagreement, we may engage in conversation about this topic. The expectation is not that you engage in the labor to correct my error, rather that in your identifying a point of departure, I can do the work of further investigation to better understand the moment of discord.

Con mucho amor y respeto,

Pau

A Letter About the Chicago ACT Collective Configuration

Mi gente,

I hope the previous letter explained the process I used to arrive at the selection of a few key revelations about our time and work together. Although, in reality, these insights will not be new to us given that we have been living this work for the past six years.

In reviewing previous letters, I realized that I have yet to describe our configuration. I only briefly mention our structure in one or two of the earlier letters used to shape our collective inquiry. I opened each conversation by asking you to describe the collective and to reflect on your role relative to the group. I found everyone's responses profoundly helpful in attempting to develop a clearer articulation of our group. I think that if we are to share aspects of our work and configuration to serve as an example for other people and collectives to sit with and think through, it is only fair that I elaborate on our structure or lack thereof.

To be clear, in addressing our configuration, I am not necessarily conveying our initial formation. That will inevitably come up throughout and is also briefly discussed by some of the members of the collective. What I mean by our configuration is how we function as a group and our intentional decision to remain malleable and amorphous in our structure. This topic came up in almost every single conversation, not necessarily in response to the same questions. However, it feels relevant and important to briefly address our porous and fluctuating roles and group structure.

In reflecting with Karen on the conversations and emergent themes I have curated for the dissertation, she noted that the rhizomatic structure mentioned in the previous letter parallels our collective dynamics (Reyes, personal communication, 2022), which are small clusters and interwoven webs. Each member of the collective has their own rich life which might be

understood as its own rhizomatic structure. When we gather as a group we may share aspects of our lives and other work, yet we are unable to fully share every facet of our person with one another. Aspects of our rhizomatic web remain unintentionally obscured to one another. Over the past six years, as we've gotten to know each other, our respective rhizomes have become entangled with each other and have shaped the ACT Collective rhizome. We bring a variety of experiences and ideas into the collective orbit. However, we also know that there are qualities and characteristics that may remain outside of our collective. We know that it is superfluous to attempt to know everything about one another, and this is not our goal. The melding of our rhizomatic webs cannot be planned or anticipated, it is something that happens over time as a result of engaging in relational interdependence. As noted by Sarah and Hilesh, our collective is contingent on the people who make up the group. Without our members, and our respective rhizomes, the ACT Collective and this particular line of inquiry would look very different.

Early in our formation, we made the decision to avoid hierarchical structures. This meant that even though we were brought together as a group by the work and vision of Sarah and William, we decided to embark as a group on a process to define the parameters of our collective. William noted that, when he and Sarah asked the members of our newly formed collective if we wanted to know their vision for our group, Amanda spoke up and requested that, instead of reading the proposal that was drafted to help fund our establishment, we be allowed to delineate our own structure according to a new shared vision.

William also explained that when he and Sarah were drafting a list of potential collective members, they identified people who they were interested in thinking and learning alongside. I understand this to translate to the notion that they were intentional about the people they invited to consider membership. While we were all coming from different spaces, backgrounds, and

perspectives, there was a common thread or a few shared beliefs or practices that made us candidates for membership. Those who decided to join the collective did not necessarily demonstrate a predisposition to collectivity. We happened to have the ability and privilege to make time for this work. We chose to embark on this journey together even though we did not fully know one another. We trusted our founders and I know that I was excited by the invitation to shape our configuration for ourselves, based on our own terms. I am in awe of and have so much respect for what we have built together and what you all continue to teach me.

I believe the decision to resist hierarchical structures and maintain malleable roles was modeled by Sarah and William in their invitation to the new members to define our structure. To be fair, we are still defining the contours of our group because we have been intentional about avoiding a fixed or prescriptive configuration. As Nicole indicated, the solidification of a singular organizing arrangement would signal a red flag that perhaps we have strayed away from our desire to remain flexible in nature. The aversion to hierarchy resulted in nebulous roles. As indicated in Amanda's interview, it was decided pretty early on that we would not commit to work or collaborations that we could not feasibly take on. This meant that we agreed to participate in projects if someone was willing to lead the work and if other members were willing to participate and support the work. The leader of a project is self-selected based on our own availability and capacity to commit. The number of participating members has never been determined; a project can be enacted by a single member or the entire group and still fall under the banner of the Chicago ACT Collective. However, in selecting projects and collaborations we are careful to ensure that we maintain a few key orienting principles. Our work should challenge and re-imagine oppressive systems of capitalism and power, and move toward decolonial configurations rooted in securing the equitable futurity of Black, Indigenous, and people of color

and other historically marginalized intersectional communities. There are no requirements or expectations around what participation and membership look like. This means that a member might participate in every single project over the course of a year, or not participate at all. As evidenced in Jessica's transcript, levels of participation and engagement vary according to life circumstances and other responsibilities, but membership is never questioned.

This practice centers people over production. Karen noted that our system of valuation is predicated on our existence, our worth is not contingent on what we do, make, or the resources we contribute. This means that we value each and every member for who they are. I will address this concept more thoroughly in a later letter.

For now, our amorphous roles and configuration attempt to center a horizontal decision-making and leadership model. Admittedly, there were some growing pains. I remember the meeting where William and Sarah reminded the collective that they could not and did not want to assume a central leadership role. This was an invitation to the members to take on the work of helping to collectively sustain our group. Moving forward we initiated the process of taking on projects based on our interest and availability. We tend to arrive at decisions through a process of consensus; this was briefly mentioned in Amanda's conversation. We discuss potential projects and decide who can participate. Members also have the option to step away from a project should something come up that pulls them away from the work. This does not happen very often, especially because we understand the implication that might have in terms of the amount of work placed on someone else. However, we are flexible and willing to problem solve and troubleshoot.

Our lack of a fixed structure or clearly defined roles has allowed us to resist institutionalization. This also means that we have not necessarily established a charter or strict

agreements in terms of our values and vision. We function within a system of open and constant communication. This is in line with Grace Lee Boggs & Scott Kurashige's (2011) reminder of the importance of dialogue in building strong communities and webs of interdependence. Juan-Carlos emphasized dialogue as imperative to our configuration which allows us to constantly attune our understanding of this group and our work. However, as mentioned above, in spite of a clearly defined manifesto, we function from a space where we constantly analyze, challenge, and desire to reconfigure oppressive forms of power. The orientation to power allows us to calibrate our bearings and may also inform our refusal to work within a structure that may inadvertently reinscribe oppressive power dynamics.

The nebulous configuration of the Chicago ACT Collective allows us to intentionally take on ideas and projects in our way and at our own pace. Karen brought up the reminder introduced by adrienne maree brown (2017) that, when we focus on things at a small scale, there is the potential for resonance and applicability at a larger scale. We don't always have to start this work from a large-scale intervention. brown uses the example of fractals to illustrate this concept. A fractal emphasizes how patterns found at the micro-level can also be found at the macro-level (brown, 2017). We are invited to seek and implement structures at a small scale and to "practice upward" to translate these configurations at a larger scale whenever applicable (brown, 2017, p. 60). When I previously stated that we are imagining and enacting different ways to be and exist in the world, I am referring to our practice of focusing on small changes reflected in our collective that may be translatable to the world later through a variety of interventions.

An integral part of this work and the perpetual dialogue that allows us to function without a fixed structure is the reminder that we often engage the same or similar ideas and concepts

frequently and repeatedly. This is important because, as we attempt to live this work, we are constantly recalibrating what it means to live and act on this work together and in our own realms outside of the collective. As we practice ways to continue to challenge and modify power in an attempt to enact equity and justice, centering those most excluded and most impacted by the current and ongoing oppressive configurations of power, we must inevitably reflect on the scope and intervention of our work. The opportunity to constantly learn from and re-engage this work is predicated on our ability to recalibrate what it means and how it looks in practice. One way we are able to do this is through conversation. We attempt to model transparency and vulnerability as individual members as well as a collective; these are indispensable traits when engaging in dialogue. We have created a community where we can sit with and openly discuss the contradictions that may arise when we attempt to live and model justice and equity through our daily lives while having to contend with late-stage capitalism and neoliberal structures that feel impossible to escape. In spite of the relocation of a few of our members to different parts of the country, we have been able to sustain dialogic exchange through text and frequent Zoom gatherings. These conversations and other examples allow for continued learning. Our collective dialogue offers space to reflect upon and rearticulate the way we think about and frame our work as well as our understanding of our ideas and practices. I will revisit the importance of ongoing dialogic exchange in a later letter.

Collaboration is important in our configuration, and it extends beyond the members of our collective. We generally tend to work collaboratively with other groups, organizations, movements, and even at times institutions. We respond to work and other people's ideas. While we do take on projects, we generally do not initiate the action or the response. This is an extension of our commitment to do less, and also part of a decision that we made early in our

formation. This stance ensures that we maintain an openly collaborative structure. While we are a fairly large collective, we are not and do not care to be representative of or assume expertise in every facet of social injustice. We see ourselves as collaborators who are willing and eager to learn from others while supporting initiatives that run parallel to our beliefs and desires for intervention in existing power dynamics and envisioning possibilities for different structural compositions.

Our collaborative nature is mirrored in García's correlation to a superhero task force, Amanda's comparison to *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* (Turner et al., 1990-1996), as well as Vanessa's observation that we are like the *Care Bears* (Heyward & Katayama, 1985). Both of the latter examples are popular culture references from the 1980s and early 1990s that reflect the power of collectivity and relational interdependence. Without going into the history and plotline of each reference, they both emphasize the individual strengths and contributions of each character and how their individual power is magnified once everyone joins forces and harnesses their power collectively. There are additional nuanced aspects of each reference that help to better illustrate these metaphors. However, it is enough to note that, in both examples, there is an attempt to center how individual strengths and differences make groups stronger by working together. Additionally, both references had a television presence and focused on educational entertainment for young people. The values embedded in each reference promoted a sense of self-awareness and self-reflection, and a notion of responsibility for ourselves, and each other. And, in the case of *Captain Planet* (Turner et al., 1990-1996), for our world. These are similar values we practice as a collective and which are beautifully captured in García's illustration (Fig. 10).

Even though we attempt to live this work, there inevitably is a need to reflect on our practices. For example, I was reminded during the conversation portion of this project that my own binaristic framing of the exclusivity and porosity of our group perhaps needed to be approached differently. Members of the collective challenged what exclusivity means and why one of my questions only offered an either/or conceptualization of inclusion or participation. The collective reminded me that this work is never clearly defined and that we may also stumble in our own articulation and conceptualization of our work and configuration. Together, we are able to shift the scope of our lens and approach the same question or problem through a slightly different opening. Members of the collective offered a much-needed reminder that outside of immediate membership we are already fairly porous in our work and collaboration. Hilesh and others suggested that, perhaps rather than think about how our collective might incorporate new members, we might want to further consider how to create pathways in and out of our collective. This does not mean that we will suspend the conversation around possibly adding new members in the near or distant future, however, given our already large membership, we might consider how to begin to welcome new partners or collaborators in a more intentional way that also honors our malleable configuration.

As with all of my observations based on the conversations with members of the collective, I do not have any definitive or culminating recommendations. My intention is not to offer a model that can be replicated. Instead, I hope that this example of how the Chicago ACT Collective refuses fixed structure helps offer an example of group configurations outside of strict systematized and institutionalized structures. As our group has grown and matured, we have continued to resist growth under the capitalist notions of expansion. We maintain that it is more important to center our relationships, our well-being, and our collaborative process based on

constant dialogue and communication all in an attempt to reconfigure oppressive systems of power and live and practice alternatives. This is not the only example, but this is our example and what currently works for our collective.

Con cariño,

Pau

A Letter About Family & Kinship

Querida familia,

In the six years since our formation, we have been committed to developing and sustaining a beautiful and nebulous collective configuration that has enabled us to create figurative and literal space that is deeply meaningful to all of us. In our conversations, many of you noted that, even though we formed as an artist collective, we have become so much more. Namely, most of us describe this group as an extension of family, as kin. This sense of deep connection has been slowly built over time and through the modeling, labor, and dedication of each member of the collective. There are a few key factors that came up in our conversations that I believe contribute to the sense of relational responsibility and care that we have cultivated together.

Our conceptualization of kinship extends beyond patriarchal, heteronormative, biological structures of family. For many of us, this practice is not new, we can point to examples from various facets of our lives and culture that reaffirm the importance of chosen family. Anthropologist Kath Weston (1997) has been credited for introducing the term chosen family as a way to consider familial dynamics outside of sanitized definitions that are constructs of hegemonic heteronormative conceptualizations (Clare, 2019; Rodriguez, 2009). While some of us may come from loving and caring families, this is not the case for everyone. Similarly, having grown up in a supportive family does not necessarily mean that we feel fully seen and honored in all of our beautiful complexity by our family units. Furthermore, the choice to invest in kinship with others with whom we do not have preexisting familiar connections does not negate our ties to our respective families. Instead, we are simply amplifying the scope of family and kin.

The notion of using biological relatedness as an indicator of familial connection has been questioned and analyzed by gender and women's studies scholar Stephanie Clare (2019). Clare evaluates research in the field of epigenetics to challenge conservative notions and definitions of the biological determinants of kinship and family. The use and applicability of environmental epigenetics allow us to better understand how various environmental factors and relational dynamics help to biologically shape and inform human development outside of genetic predispositions. This means that our biological constitution continues to change and adapt and can be informed by our relational interdependence, and that is not necessarily predicated on our genetic configuration. Clare does contend with some of the potential implications of this research, including the risk of continuing to pathologize and blame birth parents for socio-political and structural systems over which they have no control. Clare insists that it is equally important to continue to point to, name, and intervene in these systems, given their direct impact on human development.

The practice of enacting love, care, and support for kin under a broad umbrella of meaning has been an enduring custom. Various communities have had to redefine notions of kinship for the sake of survival. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) reminds us that an expanded definition of family is a form of resistance to settler colonial configurations. Clare (2019) specifically names the ethnographic work of Carol Stack (1974) and a statement of the National Association of Black Social Workers' entitled "Kinship Care" (2003) as examples that address how Black communities have sustained expansive notions and definitions of family across generations. Centuries of forced enslavement, a consequence of colonialism, informed the formation of this country and have contributed to the development of racial capitalism that has become embedded in every facet of society. These events, as well as

the aftermath of this history, have made an indelible impact on the application and conceptualization of familial structures. Expanded notions of kinship, outside of heteronormative parameters, were a way of life in ancestral lands of many peoples who were enslaved. Their application were instrumental to the survival of enslaved people in this country given their denied humanity, which included the invalidation of any kind of familial structures. After the constitutional abolition of slavery, forming kinship outside of biological ties remained a necessary practice due to the continuation of racial capitalism through other socially constructed yet structurally legitimized forms. Under ongoing settler colonialism, the continued existence of not only formerly enslaved people but also other historically marginalized communities were contingent upon broad applications and reconfigurations of kinship. These examples are important in that they serve as reminders that, for centuries, family has been predicated on relational bonds, not shared genetics. This history has become obscured to serve hegemonic assimilative purposes, yet is still present and felt through various expansive and malleable applications of kinship.

The colonial idea that family is restricted to biological determinism and organized through heteronormative dynamics runs counter to the lived experiences of many historically marginalized communities. However, these expansive examples of family and kinship are not typically depicted or shared outside of immediate experience and participation. Media and cultural studies scholar, Richard Rodriguez (2009) addresses the formation of family within a Latinx context. Rodriguez is critical of the patriarchal configurations of the “traditional” Latinx family, as well as the gendered roles and dynamics that play out within such structures. In his book, *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics*, Rodriguez makes connections between the movement era of the 1960s and 1970s and the rise of Chicano nationalism to better

understand the development of the social construct of the Latinx family that is prevalent in our current social imaginary. According to Rodriguez, the Latinx community leaned on the trope of the patriarchal heteronormative family to establish belonging and prove assimilative parallels to seek validation within a U. S. political context. However, this gendered and heteronormative trope further marginalized queer subjects as well as obscured relational interdependence that was an integral part of expansive definitions of family. Rather than take an opportunity to expand the definition of kinship, the “traditional” Latinx family trope obscured familial configurations that did not mirror a heteronormative structure. The heavy reliance on Chicano nationalism during the movement era was deployed as a strategy for self-determination. However, this approach further perpetuated patriarchal structures, given that nationalism is predicated on hegemonic colonial frameworks.

The Chicanx desire for self-definition was limited within a nationalist paradigm and reinforced systems of oppressive power. Although the precise geographic location of Aztlán is unknown, Aztlán is the ancestral home of the Indigenous Aztec people of the region currently known as central Mexico; it became an important symbol during the Chicanx movement. Cherrie Moraga (1993) challenged Chicano nationalism in her conceptualization of queer Aztlán, an inclusive “space” for those marginalized within and among already marginalized Latinx communities. Moraga states, “I recognize the dangers of nationalism as a strategy for political change. Its tendency toward separatism can run dangerously close to biological determinism and a kind of fascism” (p. 149). Moraga conveyed a skepticism toward nationalist orientations rooted in fabricated political boundaries designed to define belonging and power structures. The nation Moraga attempts to reconfigure parallels nationhood articulated by Simpson (2017), whose Indigenous conceptualization of nationhood exists through relational interdependence and

implies a communal belonging as opposed to a political orientation predicated on territorial ownership. However, even in Moraga's desire to define queer spaces within a reconfiguration of nationalism, her conceptualization heavily relies on oppressive nationalist frameworks that reinforce a sense of self-definition relative to oppressive power, rather than reimagine structures, definitions, and modes of being outside of binaristic configurations. Also, Chicanx and other communities must be careful to not perpetuate cultural appropriation through a desire to reconnect with an Indigenous past; it is important to understand the historiography of colonialism and imperialism so as to recognize the complexities and nuances that have shaped our cultural identities relative to systems of power. This awareness is not as overtly apparent in Moraga's articulation of queer Aztlán, although a more nuanced understanding of Indigenous ideologies may have been difficult for Moraga to access given the historical and genealogical moment in which she introduced these concepts. Since then, this type of information is more accessible to scholars working to reconfigure hegemonic structures due to the efforts of Indigenous communities to maintain and revive Indigenous teachings and practices as active resistance against genocide and colonial assimilationist interventions.

Indigenous studies scholar Sarah Hunt and researcher Cindy Holmes (2015) address everyday applications of centering decolonial queer practices. They remind us that an important aspect of decolonial practices is resistance against dichotomies introduced by colonial frameworks. I have been repeatedly reminded of this attunement throughout the process of shaping this investigation, from my own articulation of my questions to sitting with what has been said and what we have made. Our community is richer and stronger because we continue to challenge ourselves and each other to think and imagine outside of binaries and to use our creative energy to imagine other ways of being and existing in the world, including what it

means to be kin. Hunt and Holmes remind us that both decolonization and queering are active everyday practices, they address how they utilize the term queer beyond an identity category intended to challenge normative understandings of gender and sexuality. Hunt and Holmes explain,

As a verb, queer is a deconstructive practice focused on challenging normative knowledges, identities, behaviors, and spaces thereby unsettling power relations and taken-for-granted assumptions. Queerness is then less about a way of “being,” and more about “doing,” and offers the potential for radical social critique. (p. 156)

As a practice, queer orientations can be immensely instrumental in allowing us to approach every normative facet of life and society as a space for understanding, analysis, interruption, and reconfiguration outside of prevalent heteronormative examples. According to Hunt and Holmes, as well as Rodriguez (2009), we require more publicly accessible examples of how these everyday queer practices look. Hunt and Holmes (2015) insist on sharing and maintaining a plethora of examples that demonstrate a range of approaches and queer orientations of family and quotidian activities in order to resist politics of inclusion. The request for more public examples resists attempts to absorb and depoliticize queer decolonial efforts.

As a collective, we continue to find ways to take a queer orientation to normative frameworks. We continue to redefine what kinship means and looks like for us based on the context of our relationships. Amanda, Sarah, Nicole, and Jessica shared their awe of our collective love not only for one another, but also for our extended families that include the children of members of the collective. We are profoundly privileged to have such a vast loving and supportive kinship network. I do not take this for granted and know that we have invested a generous amount of energy and effort to create and sustain these relationships.

Con un chingo de amor,

Pau

A Letter About Care, Rest, & Camping

Corazones,

We arrive at a sense of kinship by centering love and care for ourselves and each other, as well as through rest and making space and time for creative and imaginative practices. These are mundane quotidian disciplines that allow us to move further away from heteronormative colonial conventions. While care is manifested in a variety of ways, one of the more impactful iterations of care is evidenced by centering rest, which is one of the most important lessons I have learned through my participation in the collective.

Care was mentioned by nearly every member of the collective who participated in a conversation for this project. While care can feel like a broad and vague concept, it has been theorized by scholars such as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), who addresses the ethics of care and, like Indigenous decolonial scholars (Kimmerer, 2013, 2020; Simpson, 2017, Scully, 2021), advocates for relational conceptual framings of care. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) even challenges the use of the term “more-than-human,” a descriptor I have used throughout my own writing, when addressing expansive relations beyond people. In her estimation, this term builds from an anthropocentric orientation; if we are to more fully understand the vast nuances of care and its relational impact, we also have to reconsider our use of language so that we don’t continue to theorize from an exclusively human-centered framework. She also contends with the ways care can be wielded as a moral imposition and can be manipulated to serve and promote normative hegemonic ideals. She asks us to unravel the entangled web of care created by configurations of power and proposes a three-pronged approach to understanding care that includes “labor/work, affect/affections, ethics/politics” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 5).

There are numerous challenges in addressing the complexities of care. However, for the purposes of this project, I want to briefly focus on the labor of care and the relational dynamics that care helps to shape. Vanessa shared that, throughout much of her early life, she was instructed on the importance of care, namely caring for others and the community. Yet, in spite of the assertion to care, many young people are not necessarily guided through a process of understanding how to care, let alone how to ethically perform versions of this value in ways that challenge and reconfigure oppressive power dynamics. The Care Collective (Chatzidakis et al., 2020) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) note that there is a fair amount of invisible labor that falls under the larger umbrella of care. There are multiple reasons why so much care work goes unnoticed, one key factor being that care has historically been relegated as women's work (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). In a heteronormative patriarchal society, the gendered labeling of care as feminine immediately positions this concept and its efforts as negligible unless it is being manipulated through moral obligations to uphold existing normative structures (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, Spade, 2020). The labor that care work demands both from the one doing the caring and from the one on the receiving end extends beyond physical labor to include emotional, intellectual, and psychological service. Under neoliberal structures, these are not monetizable qualities. The lack of financial value and social appreciation for the scope of care contributes to further concealing its complexities and importance. The Care Collective (Chatzidakis et al., 2020) further notes that the moral tension imbued within care adds an additional dimension of invisible labor. The work of care can evoke contradictory feelings, as the definition of the term denotes anxiety and sorrow as opposed to the more positive connotations assumed to accompany acts of service (Chatzidakis et al., 2020).

Navigating the numerous tensions and expectations can be exhausting and can obscure the relational possibilities of care.

In recent years, there has been a focus on a market-driven version of self-care that is supposedly attainable through the purchase of goods and services for the individual. This selfish orientation works to conceal the relational aspects of care and contributes to our presumed reliance on neoliberal capitalist frameworks. However, people have and continue to reconfigure care, and the events immediately following the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus placed additional emphasis on the importance of generating systems of mutual care that center collectivity and reliance on one another. For lawyer and trans activist Dean Spade (2020), mutual aid is a collective approach to providing supports and resources for ourselves and others. Mutual aid work builds from the awareness that centralized governmental structures were not constructed equitably and cannot meet the needs of everyone (Spade, 2020). This awareness does not imply that communities should stop working to address these inequities. Instead, mutual aid work offers collaborative temporary relief while communities work together to challenge and reconfigure unjust structures. Mutual aid efforts are also first steps toward imagining alternatives to what currently exists; we learn to care for ourselves and each other while moving away from capitalist frameworks. This reminds us that the transformative possibilities of care are achievable through relational dynamics and that we cannot work toward reconfiguring unjust structures alone or while firmly beholden to capitalist structures.

Care is hard work and requires rest. One of the primary ways in which the Chicago ACT Collective centers rest as a group is through camping. By practicing collective rest through communing with nature, we also participate in generative politics of capitalist and settler colonial refusal. We make space and time to temporarily halt capitalist grind culture and focus our energy

on building and sustaining our relational dynamics with ourselves, each other, and our more-than-human relations. We are all deeply committed to our collective vision of disrupting oppressive power and seeking socially just forms of reconfiguring the world. However, this means that we often take on a lot of work and forget to replenish our energy through rest. As with care, we model rest in various ways; however, camping has been one of the most consistent. It has allowed us to build stronger bonds.

Camping allows us to pause our daily lives and spend time outside. We started this practice as a collective activity within the first year of our formation. Many members of the collective already enjoyed this activity and intentionally made time to camp. Those who were not as comfortable or familiar trusted the rest of the group's enthusiasm and commitment to creating a safe and comfortable collective camping experience. Our first collective camping outing in 2017 was a great success, and we decided to continue this practice whenever possible. I will credit Karen, our perpetual motion machine, as one of the primary motivators for helping organize our frequent and repeated camping trips. She, Eric, and others have been instrumental in the collective embrace of the repeated practice of camping.

Eric's conversation excerpt emphasizes the importance of camping in helping to momentarily suspend the pressure of capitalist grind culture and other stressors that are prevalent in city living, including population density, lack of basic resources, and infrastructure inequities. Even though Chicago urban design is known for the work of Daniel Burnham, who focused on developing networks of parks throughout the city (Wrigley, 1983), the segregated nature of urban landscapes make these types of greenspaces more accessible to more affluent residents (Rothstein, 2017). In spite of the number of beautiful parks throughout the city, many people, and specifically minoritarian subjects, cannot access these spaces and tend to feel disconnected

from nature. For example, even though there was a large park in my former neighborhood, gang boundaries and oppressive policing tactics made it difficult for many young people to travel to the park and/or spend time there. This is a common experience in many neighborhoods. Additionally, gentrification and redlining have made many parks additionally inaccessible to specific groups. The ability to get out of the city and find spaces that feel restorative is a privilege; it often requires expensive resources, such as a car or specialized gear, as well as acquired knowledge of things like basic survival skills or even just where to go or how to begin. For example, I did not start camping until I was in college and had a semi-stable job that allowed me to be able to afford to slowly acquire my own gear. The contradiction of paying to camp in order to pause capitalist demands of our time and energy is not lost on members of the collective, and those who have the privilege of investing in gear or who have inherited resources freely share their supplies with others. However, we understand that there are many factors that continue to prevent historically marginalized people from (re)claiming a relationship with and to the land.

The inability to freely access nature and learn how to enact and sustain a reciprocal relationship with the land and more-than-human entities is a byproduct of settler colonialism. Reconnecting with nature is not about territorial ownership of land. In fact, decolonial efforts work to fracture the notion that land can be possessed, and instead aim to dissolve proprietorship and return the land to its stewards. This reframes our relationship with nature through an orientation rooted in conservation and allows us to better understand relational dynamics with the land.

A few of the interviews reflect the various ways in which camping allows us to build deeper relationships by reminding us of our interdependence with each other, the land, and our

more-than-human relations. While we rest, this does not mean that we spend the entire trip not doing anything. In fact, we do a lot of work – together, we set up our campsite and keep it clean, cook and wash dishes, collect and cut firewood, tend to pets, and do a plethora of other tasks. We also go on hikes or walks and explore. This counters the normative, hegemonic, capitalist-driven illusion that rest and self-care are only achievable through purchasing an all-inclusive beach resort vacation in order to not lift a finger and exploit the labor of presumably expendable service workers. This example may be exaggerated, but it offers an important distinction to our definition of rest. By spending time together without the usual responsibilities and distractions of our lives and engaging in quotidian tasks with and for one another, we strengthen our bonds of kinship through mutual care and engage in dialogic exchange. We are able to talk and think together and unburden ourselves so that we can tap into our creativity. We are then free to listen to one another, not for the sake of arriving at a singular or common understanding, but to help each other expand the scope of our own thinking and imagination. Camping allows us to remove ourselves from the pressures of our daily life and retreat into the safety and comfort of this chosen community. We can temporarily suspend the weight of having to balance, contend with, and perform various versions of ourselves in different spaces and contexts and, instead, focus on simply co-existing and imagining.

I understand that the social dynamics that shape our camping experience can feel more draining than restorative, especially for anyone who struggles with social anxiety. However, as with all of our collective practices, there is never any pressure to participate, and membership is not predicated on how frequently a member attends camping outings. Similarly, once we are at the campsite, there is no requirement to participate in any activity. For example, I have used portions of my day to read instead of joining others on hikes or other group activities. What is

most important is that we all communicate our needs in order to collectively work with and around each other's preferred modes of rest and care. In this way, we also get to know one another better and continue to solidify our bonds of kinship.

When we engage in practices of rest, especially when we are surrounded by a caring community, we are granted the opportunity to tap into our creativity and imagination. Camping enables space and time to collect ourselves and feel empowered to not only resume the daily grind, but also remember that we can impact and reconfigure oppressive systems. These trips allow us to momentarily create micro-utopias where we can practice caring for ourselves and each other and build our relational bonds. We are reminded of our agency within structures so that we no longer feel beholden to them and, instead, feel a sense of collaborative active self-determination. There is power in the temporary relief provided through our camping excursions that can generate enough energy to hold us over until the next trip. We understand that, in order to sustain the emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical labor of continuing to challenge dominant normative systems of oppression, we have to feel loved, cared for, and well-rested so that we can generatively channel our creative and imaginative capacity. I look forward to the next time we can all sit together around a campfire sharing stories, laughing, and dreaming together.

Con mucho amor,

Pau

A Letter About Individuality & Collectivity

Camarades,⁷⁸

I am frequently reminded that we are stronger together. The importance of our relational interdependence is something with which we are familiar and in which we find strength. It is a wonderful gift to be aware that we are each made stronger through our collective interdependence and that engaging in collective configurations does not diminish our sense of self but rather may deepen an understanding of ourselves. Liberal humanist notions of individualism have obscured the power of our relational development, yet we choose to continue to lean into the power of collectivity because we understand that, given the right conditions and circumstances, this can inevitably change us for the better.

In a previous letter, I shared a few observations about the power of relationality that informs our sense of continued becoming. Many members of the collective shared that this orientation to our ongoing development has been instrumental in allowing us to continue to learn from one another. Additionally, this process of reciprocal growth and self-awareness enables us to create conditions that encourage the expansion of our ideas and assumptions, as well as space to fail and learn from our mistakes.

One of the primary factors that contributes to the difficulty in offering a concrete model or recommendations for collectivity is that the people who make up each group are the most important factor – people are all beautifully and vastly different. The context of each collective varies according to the people in it. This awareness is mirrored by education theorists, such as Buffington and Bryant (2019), hooks (1994), Ladson-Billings (1995, 1999, 2014), Lai (2012),

⁷⁸ See footnote 10.

and McCarty and Lee (2014) among others, who remind us that learning is contextual and informed by the people who are involved.

While the particular identificatory aspects of each person inform the contextual dynamics of any given group, I am also careful to resist falling into an identity politics loophole. Scholars such as Jose Esteban Muñoz (1999) and Charlie Yi Zhang (2018) warn against the superficial reduction of feminist orientations that obscure the nuances of intersectionality and flatten identificatory categories; these reductionist constructions are predicated on racialized categories that were created to uphold a colonial framework. The simplification of identification works to further erase the structural and material conditions that shape and inform intersectional and disidentificatory lives. In a previous letter, I briefly addressed the theory of disidentification proposed by Muñoz (1999) in which we are invited to resist an understanding of identity shaped by binary configurations. Muñoz offers disidentification as an orientation from which to self-define identity outside of dichotomous parameters and invites us to reject colonial identificatory categories. Instead, we are reminded that we can create and imagine the parameters of our identities that neither support nor directly oppose hegemonic structures (Muñoz, 1999). I mention this note of caution because having an expansive awareness of how our identities are shaped allows us to challenge the notion that collectivity minimizes or negates our individuality. On the contrary, engaging in reciprocal relational dynamics allows us to better understand ourselves and others and thereby also grants us permission to continue to grow and change as needed.

Our understanding of identity becomes strengthened as we learn to understand not just how our intersectional identities are shaped, but also how and where our identities either deny us visibility or grant us access to power and the nuances in between. It is important to resist the

liberal urge to flatten and simplify complex structures that are co-opted and absorbed to uphold systems of power. Zhang (2018) specifically addresses this strategy in a critique of the institutional assimilation of critical feminist orientations that reduces feminism to a sanitized awareness of identity formation. This diluted form of feminism and intersectional identity formation does not contend with power and the systemic and structural conditions that shape and inform lived experiences.

Liberal absorption of feminism and identity is utilized through minor incremental changes to sustain normative and hegemonic structures (Zhang, 2018). It functions through the use of concepts and language without analysis, deconstruction, and action to implement changes to oppressive systems of power. In our own work, we are careful to avoid the propagation of liberal understandings of identity that center individual rights as granted through the nation-state or earned based on merit (Baber & Bartlett, 2019). We are also fully aware that the notion of equality is a charade of liberalism that negates and ignores the unequal distribution of resources, material goods, and power. Instead, we continue to challenge politics of inclusion (Hunt & Holmes, 2015) and expand our understanding of intersectional and disidentificatory identities. We simultaneously work to acknowledge our position relative to systems of oppression, with an awareness that our proximity to power shifts according to context. Our ideation of a differently configured world centers equitable redistribution of resources according to proximity to power.

The artist Glenn Ligon addresses the strength and power of interdependence in shaping our sense of self and others in the piece *Give Us a Poem* (2007). The artwork depicts the words “Me” and “We” in capitalized font composed of neon lights arranged in a vertical palindrome in which the words line up to mirror one another. The text is borrowed from a poem delivered by Muhammad Ali at Harvard University in 1975 (The Studio Museum in Harlem, n.d.). The neon

lights alternate to illuminate one word at a time, never both in unison. The oscillation of the light reflects reciprocal exchange in constant motion. We can analyze the work through multiple orientations, including by addressing racialized dynamics. However, for the purpose of this letter and our inquiry, my focus is on the relationality conveyed through the text. Ligon's piece and Ali's poem address the ways we come to know ourselves through relational exchange.

This interaction between the "me," the self, and the "we," the collective or community, can be strengthened by leaning into vulnerability and releasing the ego. This is not to say that all insecurities are easily dissolved and put away when we embark on intentional relational interactions; but rather, they become less necessary as we come to know ourselves better and as others demonstrate an ability to see us in all of our beautiful contradictions. Allowing for a softening of our edges and releasing of our postures enables us to celebrate our unique differences and serves to remind us that we do not need to be in competition with others. The notion of rivalry prompted by competition is rooted in the illusion of siloed individuality and scarcity. Both are constructs used by systems of hegemonic racial capitalism to prompt us into believing that our sense of self-worth is only predicated on hierarchical structures and proximity to white supremacy. Instead of approaching relationships from a competitive stance, relational interdependence reminds us that we are an amalgamation of various strands of connections and influences that extend beyond the immediate physical realm (Simpson, 2017).

When we are able to release competition and jealousy from how we come to understand ourselves, we shift how we show up and how we engage with one another. Instead of defining ourselves in comparison to others, we can see ourselves as an extension of others with the ability to profoundly impact each other. Sarah recommended a blog post by the poet Fatimah Asghar (2022); through Asghar's contemplation of love and jealousy I was reminded that we can hold

space for these contradictory feelings when they surface and contemplate their source, rather than assume that they are definite and fixed sensations. We can embark on the exploration of the source of feelings like jealousy and envy on our own and with the people we love and care for. I appreciate Asghar's reminder that unaddressed jealousy can calcify and erode parts of us. However, Asghar also notes that, "jealousy when expressed openly, can also be a pathway for admiration and inspiration. It can bring us closer rather than farther apart," (par. 12). Asghar reminds us that, approached from a different orientation, the public naming of our jealousy or insecurities may not only help us become more human and humble with our relations, it can also lead us to model bravery and build trust in whomever we confide. Asghar recognizes the importance of vulnerability in this process. Our relationship should reflect enough love, care, and trust such that we feel comfortable openly sharing the parts of ourselves we have been taught to keep most deeply concealed. We are invited to lower our guard a bit further and allow ourselves to be seen by others.

Publicly sharing our insecurities allows us to become better acquainted with areas of personal growth and development that may still be obscured or not as immediately apparent to us. This may surge through our own process of self-reflection, and also allow our close relations to share in vulnerable reciprocal exchange and help reflect these blind spots back to us. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) explains the process of relational recognition, "Part of being in a meaningful relationship with another being is recognizing who they are, it is reflecting back to them their essence and worth as a being, it is a mirroring" (pp. 180). Simpson further explains that, as we gaze into the mirror, we are also positioned as a mirror – we simultaneously occupy both roles. This awareness allows us to lovingly recognize our relations while also understanding our role, responsibility, and complicity in this reciprocal interdependence. The process of openly

sharing aspects of ourselves that cause self-doubt is not an invitation to weaponize these insecurities or to provoke shame. Opening up about our self-doubt is not achieved without great risk. However, “what’s possible on the other side of that risk is connection. Is the healing of narratives we’ve told ourselves about ourselves. And is the realization that we all deeply need each other, always,” (Asghar, 2022, par. 17). Our complicated feelings offer a further glimpse into our perceptions and offer lines of personal exploration and understanding.

This process may also help strengthen our respect for one another, although respect and recognition are not predicated on our vulnerability either. Respect and recognition are contingent upon our existence. This is not to say that we should openly love and trust everyone we meet and encounter. If we remain open to attempting to see another person for who they are, we may be able to trace the source of our differences. However, everyone is not ready or willing to have themselves reflected back onto themselves, which is why it can be easier to engage in this practice with those with whom we are in reciprocal relationship or have a desire to form a deeper connection. We cannot pressure or hurry this process for anyone, not even ourselves. We each move at our own pace and cannot rush the process of self-awareness. We can, however, continue to hold one another in all of our contradictions and allow ample room for continued growth and reflection. We will inevitably stumble and even possibly fail during this endeavor. However, adrienne maree brown (2020) reminds us that cancel culture only creates additional barriers to relational interdependence. Instead, we are invited to support one another through a process of growth and discovery. Admitting when we are wrong and especially when we cause harm is an integral part of engaging in relational interdependence. We are only able to learn and grow from our errors once we can name and admit our mistakes. Mistakes then can serve as opportunities for further growth and self-awareness while strengthening our ties to our communities.

As noted in both William and Nicole’s conversations, relational interdependence reminds us that we shape, inform, and learn from each other, whether we are aware of it or not. Simpson (2017) and Cree-Métis (Michele First Nation) scholar and friend Ionah Scully (2021) remind us that, according to Indigenous pedagogy, meaning is made in relation. Simpson states, “Relationality gives birth to meaning,” (p. 184). When we engage in intentional relational interdependence, we may feel the resonance of these dynamics more profoundly. This doesn’t mean that this exchange is only enacted through established relationships. Relationality offers an awareness of how we shape and inform one another, even those we meet momentarily or in passing; traces of our interactions may linger and leave impressions. Our collective differences provide a plethora of experiences and perspectives from which to share and learn, and we are invited to expand the scope of how we learn and what is worth knowing and understanding. Nicole and Jessica reiterated that who we think with and alongside informs our own understanding and conceptualization. Because we are fully embodied individuals who contain knowledge and understanding holistically, our learning should also be fully embodied. This is a reminder that we learn through our whole selves and that knowledge is not exclusively contained through intellectual and institutional exchanges.

Scully (2021) emphasizes that Indigenous community building requires “relational accountability” (p. 53). This is an important extension of our relational interdependence that reminds us of our reciprocal responsibility to ourselves and each other. Scully notes,

We have different relationships with the pillars of colonial power—colonialism, white supremacy, and cis-heteropatriarchy that also uphold and are upheld by capitalism, ableism, and nativist-nationalism. We therefore have different responsibilities *based on*

those relationships to power and each other under these systems. The practice of *miskâsowin* helps us identify who we are and subsequently what our roles are. (p. 54)

Engaging in relational dynamics is a laborious practice. When we recognize the scope of our responsibilities to each other and to ourselves we lean into the nuanced and generative aspects of reciprocal exchange. Scully's instruction prompts us to bear in mind our commitment to continuing to better understand our positionality and complicity within oppressive systems. It serves as a reminder that difference and discomfort are integral components of relational accountability, but that our positionality and proximity to power and privilege are unfixed and can shift. Contending with our various layers of responsibility and accountability is a process that we must reengage frequently. Like Scully, Eric and Vanessa both observe the importance of relational accountability. While Eric and Vanessa may not have used Scully's term, they specifically point to trust and care as important for recognizing our responsibility and engaging in difficult conversations.

Collective members, Juan-Carlos and Ivan in particular, talked about the importance of dialogic exchange – the stimulating and pleasurable, the more onerous, and everything in between and beyond. Dialogue is an important factor in our work as a collective, as well as for our continued relational dynamics. One of the reasons we are able to engage in a range of discussions and hold up mirrors for one another for our continued growth and relational accountability is because we have lovingly shaped our collective to be a “brave space.” I was reminded of the impact of the concept of brave space by activist June Kuooh (personal communication, October 2019). They conveyed a similar observation made by Hunt and Holmes (2015) that the notion of “safe space” can reinscribe sameness as it tends to avoid discomfort and, by effect, the ability to critically address privilege and the uneven distribution of power,

resources, opportunities, and more. Safe space under a liberal orientation continues to marginalize those who do not already share similar orientations or attunements to the majority in a group. The notion of safety, defined narrowly, can create siloed communities that regurgitate similarly sanitized conceptions of potentially critical topics. On the other hand, brave space can offer a range of approaches through which to enact relational accountability. The importance of bravery is emphasized in Eric, Karen, and Sarah's conversations. Bravery allows us to openly share our ideas and opinions as well as offer openings that may challenge our current conceptions. It is far easier to lead with bravery when we move from a space of love, care, and trust.

In a previous letter I addressed the role and importance of love not only as a continued source of sustained inquiry, but also as a space from which we can challenge ourselves and one another. The love we have generated amongst the members of the collective has been built through continued care, trust, and vulnerability. These emotional exchanges offer openings through which to enact relational accountability and continue to ask difficult questions and point to spaces of divergence or disagreement. The goal in these conversations is not to persuade one another to align or mirror our thinking. Dialogue offers opportunities to share our perspectives based on our situated life experiences. We may be able to expand our understanding and even point to our own internalized and often hard to recognize biases through reciprocal exchange and the ability to ask questions. I have personally experienced this kind of loving dialogue and have also been challenged to expand my thinking through my membership in the Chicago ACT Collective. Most members have refined the ability to offer critical feedback in a profoundly generous way. I believe this is credited to the awareness that didactic statements or questions tend to stifle continued conversation. Rather than attempting to convince us to align our thinking,

members of the collective generously present a series of questions that allow the person being questioned to trace their own logic as well as offer new openings through which to consider a problem, concept, or interaction.

I am aware that this type of dialogue is ameliorated through pre-existing relationships. It is much more difficult to engage in this type of exchange with those we don't already trust and/or with whom we disagree (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). We can disagree with people but it is sometimes easier to navigate moments of disaccord when we are already engaged in a loving bond. For the members of the Chicago ACT Collective, engaging in dialogue is one manifestation of the way we care for one another and the world. Difference is uncomfortable because it asks us to truly sit with and contend with our ideas, opinions, and biases. This can be very uncomfortable if we are not taught how to do this work, or to develop the emotional intelligence to be able to name our feelings and process the source of our discomfort. Difference should not be a precedent to avoid potentially generative discourse. Author Robert Jones, Jr., who goes by Son of Baldwin on Twitter, stated, "We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist" (Jones, 2015). Jones, Jr.'s admonition allows us to distinguish between generative difference and the negation of our ideas predicated on a perceived lack of human dignity. Scully (2021) echoes a similar distinction and notes that it is pointless and ineffective to attempt to "dialogue with our colonizer-oppressor; they cannot hear us while we are straining to speak with their boots on our necks," (p. 53). Again, this does not grant us permission to avoid engaging in difficult conversations. However, both scholars remind us that we should preserve our energy to engage in these discussions with those who are willing to hear what we have to say. Even those who are not necessarily ready to engage in this level of exchange, but who still respect our dignity may,

with time and displays of trust and care, arrive at an open disposition from where dialogue may be possible.

Difference for us means and implies strength; this was brought up frequently in our conversations. A few members of the collective credited adrienne maree brown's (2017) articulation of differences, grounded in biodiversity, as instrumental in our own conceptualization of the benefits of difference and diversity. brown utilizes biomimicry to describe not only our interdependence with nature, but also as a way to understand that human interactions are mirrored in the natural world. Like brown, Simpson (2017) and Kimmerer (2020) remind us that, by observing and studying our more-than-human relations, we stand to learn about ourselves. The natural world is strengthened by an abundance of diversity. When we eliminate difference, the natural world suffers – this is best exemplified by the global systemic elimination of crop varieties. In the meantime, we can continue to engage in difficult conversations with those who are ready for this type of exchange and perpetuate generative examples of what this looks like in practice.

Dialogic exchange allows us to further challenge the liberal notion of individuality and enables us to better understand ourselves and our relational interdependence. These conversations are contingent upon our ability to listen to one another and ask questions. Artist and curator Nato Thompson (2012) mentions art historian Grant Kester's term "dialogic art" as one example of the many strategies that contemporary artists have assumed in engaging everyday life as artistic form and a site of intervention. As a collective, we firmly believe in the power of artistic production – both the making of work and the contemplation of art – as a vehicle for conversation. Ivan and Juan Carlos note that this is a guiding orientation not only in our structure and interaction as a collective, but also when we engage in artistic production. In

2017, we deployed a version of dialogic art in which our conversation was the artistic intervention when we gathered for a conversation for On the Table (n. d.), an initiative of The Chicago Community Trust. This, however, is a singular example. What might we be able to collectively generate if we continue to approach dialogic interactions as an artistic form?

Relational interdependence allows us ample space to learn more about ourselves and each other. When we have space and time to explore who we are – our strengths, our areas of growth, and our relational interdependence – we are better able to sustain brave spaces that allow difficult conversations to emerge. We are better able to work from a space of relational accountability and express our love and care for one another not by overlooking our areas of growth, but by generously helping to identify where and how we might begin to address our expansion. We are also cognizant that, without centering an analysis of power and systemic racism manifested through normative colonial and capitalist structures, we run the risk of perpetuating further erasure of our collective experiences. We understand that this work requires a fair amount of emotional, spiritual, and intellectual labor, yet we are committed to our continued learning and the desire to move further away from oppressive systems by beginning to enact alternatives. It is better to fail in our attempts to liberate ourselves from systems of oppressive power and try again, rather than remain inactive and beholden to these structures. I am lucky to have such a generous community of friends and co-conspirators with whom to share this labor. I know that we are stronger together.

Con mucho amor,

Pau

A Letter About Vulnerability & Belonging

Amigues⁷⁹ del alma,

Karen mentioned that a social worker with whom she works spoke of love as a forcefield. The analogy explains how love can offer protection for those who are attuned to its vibrational frequency. Thinking about this expansive understanding of love, I imagine that the oscillation of this forcefield is equally expansive. This perimeter is meant to safeguard against harmful articulations of love and care. If we desire entry into a particular love bubble, we may be required to tune our own vibrational frequency in order to be granted access to the desired space. The forcefield identified by this social worker also points to communities of belonging.

Belonging can offer immense recognition and freedom to those who are a part of the community, this was a prominent feature in Silvia's transcript. It can also be understood in close proximity to kinship and family, as belonging implies membership. I addressed how the collective extends notions of kinship in a previous letter. I have also addressed how relational dynamics can allow us to develop a better sense of self and others; this can also inform how we are granted acceptance in communities. Here, I want to linger on the function of trust and vulnerability in supporting the development of love and care, and in helping to shape expansive notions of belonging.

Hilesh and Silvia both shared lovely articulations of how trust and love vacillate to support one another in their own time and rhythm. Hilesh described the process of arriving at love through choreographed trust. He further noted that this practice is sustained by community. In a follow up conversation I was able to ask Hilesh how he conceptualizes this choreography (Patel, personal communication, 2022). He explained that he envisions choreographed trust as an

⁷⁹ See footnote 4.

improvised choreography. Rocha (2012) and Goldman (2010) both share that improvisation requires a great deal of interaction and engagement in order to comfortably adapt and perform an impromptu and relationally contextual version of any given choreography or score. Through Hilesh's framing of choreography as improvised, with practice and experience moving with and through trust, we are able to adapt this choreography more spontaneously. I also appreciate the reminder that this movement is sustained through relational interdependence. Our intertwined bond becomes the propellant for singular or collaborative choreographed trust. Silvia's interpretation of the fluctuation between trust and love is conveyed as a beat or rhythm. For Silvia, this process begins with trust, and love is cultivated as a reaction or reverberation of trust. However, this is not a singular exchange, according to Silvia – there is an echo between trust and love that helps to extend and reinforce their exchange and dynamic. Silvia notes that this rhythmic vacillation allows space for vulnerability to emerge and further sustain this composition. Both Hilesh and Silvia convey trust as active, not stagnant. Once we are gifted or granted trust it is not implied that we have that trust indefinitely. We continue to cultivate and build trust, as well as love, and constantly negotiate and recalibrate their contours. Sarah shared that we have to continuously show up for ourselves and others in order to maintain the vacillation of these exchanges.

Potawatomi scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer (2020) explains that reciprocity follows gratitude and that expressions of appreciation can assume a vast range of configurations outside of capitalist commodities. Kimmerer describes gift economies as alternatives to hegemonic capitalist market economies and notes,

The currency in a gift economy is relationship, which is expressed as gratitude, as interdependence and the ongoing cycles of reciprocity. A gift economy nurtures the

community bonds that enhance mutual well-being; the economic unit is “we” rather than “I,” as all flourishing is mutual. (par. 19)

Gift economies challenge models of commodification that promote scarcity and accumulation. Instead, we are invited to reconfigure what can be shared and exchanged as gifts, including time, space, emotional labor, and other resources deemed intangible through capitalist market-driven configurations. In Kimmerer’s gift economy, the exchange of trust and shared vulnerability are invaluable presents that help to sustain modes of interdependence.

I am interested in what would happen if we apply Kimmerer’s (2020) gift economy to arrive at a more capacious understanding of vulnerability. I find it striking that the etymology of the word vulnerability denotes wounding and injury (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). While I understand the difficulty in opening ourselves up to honest exchange in ways that make us feel exposed, I can’t get over how both the etymology and definition of the word vulnerability already imply and expect harm. *Is it any wonder that we struggle to lead with vulnerability if we are taught to expect pain as a consequence of being open and honest? Could we begin to reconfigure vulnerability through generative openings informed by gift economies? Vulnerability approached as an opportunity for connection and a space from which to build trust and love enables the possibility for deep and meaningful relationships to manifest. This orientation allows us to model different understanding and application of vulnerability.*

Engaging vulnerability is a privilege and a gift. Poet Lora Mathis (2020) states, “There is a privilege to unpack in who is given the right to be vulnerable, and how emotional reactions are read differently depending on who has them” (pp. 63-64). This sentiment is echoed by Brantmeier and McKenna (2020) who explain how many of us who exist in the margins of society and are constantly under attack are made to feel that we cannot afford to be vulnerable.

Beyond the risk that our information and experiences can be weaponized against us, marginalized communities are not frequently granted space to be our fully embodied selves (Brantmeier and McKenna, 2020). This is especially true in a racialized society that generally holds a narrow and undervalued understanding of the range of feelings and emotions of historically marginalized intersectional communities. There is an additional uncertainty involved when we peel back our layers, lower the barriers, and allow others to get to know us beyond the persona or front we use to navigate the world. However, Brantmeier and McKenna propose a pedagogy of vulnerability as an instrumental method for critical teaching and learning. They name Freire (1968) and hooks (1994) as the predecessors of this pedagogical orientation. Brantmeier and McKenna (2020) state,

Ultimately, vulnerability repositions knowing and coming to know in a co-creative, dialogical, and communal process of discovering and generating knowledge that is at once cognitive, emotional, embodied, transrational, and intuitive in practice.

Vulnerability in education is a radical stance of not knowing and humility, in a process of honest recognition of the profound and reverent mysteries and challenges of life. (p. 4)

I appreciate Brantmeier and McKenna's recontextualization of vulnerability as a powerful generative force. They remind us that moving from a space of mutual vulnerability can be applied broadly beyond educational settings. The pedagogy of vulnerability provokes an embrace of relational interdependence as a space for collaborative meaning-making that sustains our curiosities through continued openings. Brantmeier and McKenna recommend leaning on lived experience as a generative starting point for emotionally-oriented learning. This is echoed by pedagogical theorist William Pinar (1994/1975, 2011) who introduced the importance of *currere*, the investigation of the imbricated relationship between our lives and institutional and hidden

curriculum. Our lives, explored through vulnerable openings, function as material for research and continued understanding (Pinar, 1975; Rocha, 2012). As noted in the previous letter, honesty and vulnerability also require that we contend with our positionality relative to systems of power and white supremacy. Paying attention to these contexts will help us negotiate when we need to just listen and ask questions and when we might be able to actively participate in sharing our experiences. We have to be mindful of how and when we participate, while still being our full selves and ensuring that there is an equitable consideration of multiple voices and positionalities.

The understood risk involved in engaging vulnerability allows for an appreciation of these exchanges and amplifies our sense of self and others. The risk is not, however, eliminated. The levels of prospective risk vary according to context and our positionality relative to proximity to power. However, we work to create a collective space predicated on bravery, trust, and honesty that allows us to embrace vulnerability that may not exist in other conversational spaces. As noted by members of the collective and addressed in a previous letter, it is also important to have spaces in which we can comfortably retreat to replenish our energy so that we can continue to sustain the difficult labor of modeling and leading through vulnerability, generosity, and care. Eric and García noted that we need spaces of refuge. Moving away from the inclusion-exclusion binary, there is value in sustaining closed-off spaces and communities. This is not to say that these spaces should remain permanently guarded, unless that is their intention. The ACT Collective allows for the malleability and porosity of our configuration yet, at times it is best to share space and time with our accomplices and chosen family because we feel more comfortable sharing with folks we already know and trust. These spaces allow us to openly work through ideas and even fail in our articulation or conceptualization. We lean on one

another for help in various realms. It is often easier to engage in these practices without having to qualify or over-explain ourselves to those who may not know us very well.

The safeguarding of our collective haven functions to continue to attune our awareness about how we enter spaces and engage with communities of all kinds. Just as we do not wish to have someone else pass judgment or make assumptions about our needs, we work to intentionally avoid these practices. We also do our best to avoid the recapitulation of extractivist colonial structures, and we draw on examples modeled by others for how to do this effectively. For example, previous generations of socially-engaged cultural workers challenged the role and intentions of outsiders who seemed to be simply interested in parsing through and extracting snippets of information to sustain their already biased assumptions about historically marginalized communities. We have learned and taken note and continue to practice vigilance against suffering and imposing similar experiences on ourselves and other communities.

Moving from a space of vulnerability is not easy. Yet, Irma Thomas (1986) reminds us that “good things don’t come easy.” Thomas was singing about unrequited love impacted by infidelity; however, the reminder that relational exchanges imply labor but are also rewarding grants us permission to begin to experiment with the possibilities enabled through vulnerability. The potential strain of this work is minimized, not eliminated, when we practice vulnerability with those with whom we may feel more comfortable, even if it's just with ourselves. In the same song, Thomas notes, “It’s not the quantity, it’s the quality” (Thomas, 1986). This reminder may serve as an invitation to sustain the potentially difficult and uncomfortable labor of vulnerability at our own pace. We can begin by engaging in more open and honest conversations with ourselves and slowly, at our own pace, begin to implement this mode of being through broader relational dynamics.

I feel immensely grateful to each of you for teaching me about vulnerability and for being patient with me while I softened my edges and allowed myself to be more fully seen and present. I have shared parts of myself with you that remain unknown to my family and other relations, and there are aspects I have yet to more openly display. Together, we continue to hold space for tenderness so that we can better know ourselves and each other and replenish our energy to continuously reengage in the often difficult labor of fighting for a more just society and reconfiguring systems of oppression.

Gracias por nuestro amor colectivo,

Pau

A Letter of Love & Gratitude

Querides⁸⁰ amigas⁸¹ del alma,

I am continuously grateful for our collective and for each of you. I honestly think we have built something beautiful and continuously abundant. As expressed in many of the transcript excerpts, in a completely unexpected way, our artist collective has become a chosen family. The awareness of our relational interdependence has allowed us to lean on each other and our unique experiences, skill sets, and perspectives to not only continue to grow, but to harness our collective brilliance in order to imagine and practice modes of existing outside of centralized systems of oppressive power. We have been able to generate this collective configuration through an amorphous collective structure and by openly and vulnerably practicing love, care, and trust.

We are a singular example of collectivity. We have been inspired by other versions – both formalized and less obvious – of interdependence, yet we are one configuration. Many of our members are explicitly aware of different collective structures, given that many of us straddle multiple collectives and/or relational communities. Our various experiences with collectives highlight an important distinction that I have yet to make and which surged through our conversations – collectivity does not automatically imply relational interdependence. There are nuances and various configurations in all facets of life, and we should approach understandings of collectivity through expansive articulations. While being a part of a collective does not require a commitment to or awareness of relational interdependence, choosing to engage in relational dynamics allows for generative collectivity to emerge. We become more

⁸⁰ See footnote 3.

⁸¹ See footnote 4.

aware of our connectedness and how we impact and inform one another, and we recognize that, by integrating commonalities and differences, we are far stronger together than as solitary units.

The excerpts from the conversations included in the second part of this dissertation span a number of topics that warrant additional attention and consideration. I have been able to briefly elaborate on a few concepts, yet there is plenty of room for further examination by myself and others. The concepts that I chose to elaborate on address our nebulous configuration, expansive approaches to kinship, the importance of care and rest, articulations of coming to know ourselves through relational exchange, and the role of vulnerability in belonging. As previously noted, these themes are rhizomatic and they shape and inform one another; they also resist singularity of meaning.

Through the exploration of themes that surged through our conversations, I have leaned on three additional concepts to assist in the elaboration of our ideas – these are love, decoloniality, and anti-capitalism. I directly addressed the first two in Part One of this document when explaining the theoretical orientations that have guided much of this work. However, I will admit that I am not well-versed in the vast scope of anti-capitalist theories. I am familiar with the imbricated dynamics between imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism, and how these oppressive structures have and continue to shape our social, political, and economic configurations in obvious and subtle ways. Even though I am familiar with critiques of capitalism through theoretical orientations that seek to fracture and reconfigure its manifestations, I feel that I still have much to learn about how communities and scholars have approached an understanding of this concept.

I am committed to learning more about anti-capitalist theories and efforts. I am most excited to learn more about anarchist theories and practices. For example, I was recently

introduced to the Anarchist Pedagogies Collective (APC), formerly known as the Anarchist Pedagogies Network. The group recently announced that, along with the change to their name, they have also revised the framing of their values to better align with their efforts (Anarchist Pedagogies Collective, 2022). The commitments shared on the APC website parallel many of the Chicago ACT Collective efforts and resonate with this investigation. However, the APC is adamant in their refusal to become an academic space; they specifically disapprove of the ways in which academia works to uphold and perpetuate imperialist and settler colonial projects. While the ACT Collective resists institutionalization, the members of the collective have willingly participated in this academic inquiry and a few of the members straddle academic spaces. This does not mean that the ACT Collective has become an academic space, but this tension is something I would like to continue to sit with and think through. I have previously noted that, even though it is not my intention to contribute to colonial approaches to research, there is still extensive work to be done to reconfigure institutions of formal learning so that they do not reinforce colonialism. I cannot control how this work will be used by others, just as I cannot dictate how the institution will archive this investigation. This awareness, however, serves to sustain my curiosity. I see these challenges as invitations to continue to think about how we may be able to draw from decolonial approaches to collectivity to reconfigure educational spaces of all kinds.

There are other lingering threads of potential investigation that may unravel over time. One key strand is exemplified in García's transcripts when he addressed the amplification of manifestations of love outside of romanticized or pleasant articulations. Specifically, García described anger and rage as important sources of love. I immediately thought about how Audre Lorde (1984) addresses the use of anger as an influential source through which to engage in

critical investigations of power structures. This sentiment is echoed by Chickasaw scholar Jodi A. Byrd and Muscogee (Creek) scholar Sarah Deer who engaged in conversation with gender and women's studies theorists Durba Mitra and Sarah Haley (2021). Their conversation addressed the generative and powerful effects and affects of rage. Both Byrd and Deer anchor their work in rage and a desire for justice for their people, communities, and the world. This form of generative rage is in service of and for justice; it is not a selfish rage and can function as another manifestation of love. I want to spend more time learning about and thinking through how we may be able to harness the potential of abjection and other affects deemed unfavorable under normative configurations. I suspect that anger and generative refusal may help us to understand how we can radically reconfigure pedagogical approaches and existing institutional learning spaces. The openings created by these seemingly negative feelings allow us to further amplify our understanding of collectivity.

I have repeatedly noted that the structure of our collective and the interventions of this investigation are not new. However, there is still so much to learn and understand about how we can mobilize approaches to relational interdependence to reconfigure oppressive systems of all kinds and (re)learn how to become self-reliant outside of existing structures. We require additional case studies of collectivity enacted in a variety of communities and contexts; thankfully, these types of studies, both formal and informal, are emerging and resurfacing more and more frequently in response to our current global realities.

Words cannot express the gratitude I feel for each of you. Our collective has been profoundly influential in helping to shape me as a person. Our work led me to pursue doctoral studies and continues to inspire my curiosities. I still maintain a level of distrust of academic institutions; however, I no longer vehemently reject academia and, instead, have found a

temporary landing point through which to continue to teach while exploring various lines of inquiry. I carry the impressions of our interactions and experiences, and I return to countless memories of our collective joy when I'm in need of motivation. We have built something beautiful, deeply meaningful, and impactful. I am certain that I will continue to be transformed by our collective for years to come.

Con todo mi corazón,

Pau

CHAPTER 6: A LETTER OF CLOSURE

A Concluding Letter to the Doctoral Committee

Dear Dr. Lucero, Dr. Travis, Dr. Ruiz, and Dr. Reyes,

Thank you for your time and attention in helping guide and advise me through the development of this study. In my introductory letter to you I shared that my mother would frequently remind me, “*No te crearon las golondrinas*” (Rosa A. Valencia, personal communication, n. d.). While I have come to understand my mother’s use of this saying to remind me of our relational interdependence, I admittedly still struggle to fully understand this phrase. There are nineteen known varieties of golondrinas, swallows, that reside on every continent except for Antarctica, although they have been sighted near the Antarctic region (RSPB, n. d.). In some cultures swallows are perceived to be symbols of freedom (Greenwood Davis, 2021). I suspect that their speed and agility contribute to this association. These nimble birds became a common symbol for sailors who, before more advanced navigational technology was invented, would look for swallows to indicate they were near land. They have become a common feature in American-style tattoo tradition and function as a symbol for a safe return home, strength, and speed (Wang, 2016). They also have spiritual significance, as people believe that the souls of shipwrecked sailors were carried by swallows from the depths of the ocean to heaven (Lederer, 2019). In Portugal swallows are a common symbol and protective charm; they are frequently used to adorn the exterior of a home and/or an entryway (Greenwood Davis, 2021). They are also believed to hold a melancholic representation of the connection to home and family (Greenwood Davis, 2021). Melancholia is framed as a desire to return to the nest or maintain a connection with the home in spite of migration or travel. The symbolic significance of

these winged relations does not necessarily align with the lessons inferred by my mother's saying, but perhaps this phrase is anchored to the migratory patterns of swallows. Like other birds, swallows tend to migrate if they reside in regions where there are significant weather shifts, and they tend to relocate to regions where they have access to food. They are known to mate for life and migrate in large flocks, and they return to their nests year after year as long as they are not destroyed (Greenwood Davis, 2021). It seems that many people don't understand this and see their nests as the remnants of temporary guests. I remember that my grandmother considered them to be an annoying nuisance because she would have to clean up after them if they nested in her courtyard.

I previously assumed the proverb miscalculated swallow behavior, implying that they were autonomous creatures calling me to follow them in their independence. I now realize that I could interpret the meaning to be similar to the phrase, "You can't just run away and join the circus." This connotation sees a flock of swallows as their own family that calls you to join them and relinquish your responsibility to your biological family. It mirrors the tensions around genetic determinisms of kinship discussed earlier. My mother reminds me that she raised me and I am beholden to my family; however, following a flock of swallows or the circus or chosen family does not mean that I leave my biological family behind. Chosen family can provide things that biological families may not be able to, and vice versa, and it is possible to cultivate both simultaneously. Many members of the ACT Collective challenge the strict distinctions between these two types of family and, in fact, weave the two together. Biological family and chosen kin can complement each other and offer broader relational resonance.

This investigation is a case study of how the Chicago ACT Collective understands and enacts collectivity. I was drawn to this topic because, as a member of the collective, I have

personally felt the transformative effects of collectivity. The decision to invest my time, energy, and other resources into building and sustaining this community has been infinitely rewarding in obvious and not immediately apparent ways. I have felt various registers of relationality, but the impact has been most pronounced through my participation in the ACT Collective. When I made the decision to leave my home base on the south side of Chicago to continue my studies at the postgraduate level, I found myself seeking out similar interactions and spaces. The immediate absence of the collective, my chosen family, made collectivity a central focus. I wanted to understand how and why the collective had left an indelible mark on my life and sense of self, as well as how our configuration might be applied in other communities.

My interest in collectivity is a continuation of prior curiosities. For many years, I had been interested in understanding identity formation; this was the central focus of my master's thesis. I think that my fascination with this topic stems from a desire to understand the tensions I felt as an immigrant, cis-gendered, woman of color growing up in a working class family in segregated low-income neighborhoods in Chicago. I was not familiar with the concept of intersectionality until I returned to graduate school to obtain a teaching license. Learning about identity formation through intersectional frameworks allowed me to better understand social constructions, and I centered explorations of identity in much of my curriculum as a classroom teacher. While these lessons were effective in many ways, it was often challenging to help students make connections between the interrelated aspects of their discrete becoming and their communities. The Froebel curriculum I previously mentioned in Chapter 3 became a bridge through which to make these connections and allowed my students and me to explore local histories and the students' specific contextual and situated relational development. Students were better able to trace the relationships between the events that led to the creation of our school to

their own formation of self. They were able to move beyond liberal humanist notions of individual identity to an understanding of self, mediated through intergenerational relational interdependence. Yet, students still struggled to embrace and enact collectivity with their peers as was evidenced by the expressions of dread and vexation whenever they were asked to work collaboratively. This study is a result of my love and appreciation for the people that make up the Chicago ACT Collective. It is also a result of my desire to better understand collectivity in order to be able to pedagogically integrate collective and collaborative attunements in both formal and informal education settings.

Decolonial Indigenous orientations serve as a methodological and theoretical framework for this investigation in an attempt to disrupt settler colonial apparatuses of all kinds. Decolonial methodologies help to disrupt colonial research practices; paired with research-creation, this invites wide openings not only for what counts as research but also for how research is conducted. I was drawn to the emergent and iterative aspects of research-creation and have learned that time is a key factor to consider when working through this methodology. While I think that a longer study may have allowed for a more intentional process of emergent research-creation, this project functions as the seedling for future research.

Love and erotic attunement are central theoretical attunements. They have shaped how I engage this work and my interpretation of the findings, and they also function as reminders to follow my curiosities. For some, this may be an obvious outlook; however, I have had to learn to validate my desire to know and understand the things, questions, and ideas that spark my interests. I have had to work to sustain my creativity and reclaim extrasensorial forms of knowledge. In my experience as a student and educator in public education, I have seen that these traits are not usually considered to be central to learning. In fact, more often, these are

qualities that are systemically tempered. This is part of the reason why I felt dejected in school settings for a long period of my life. For many years, I felt that love was a frivolous concept and that attention to love was a distraction from the labor of attempting to move toward socially just reconfigurations of hegemony. My dismissal of love was learned through various examples and reinforced by the assumption that learning and knowledge are void of feeling and affect.

However, I credit the members of the Chicago ACT Collective for patiently helping me understand the expansive application and significance of love. Love has played a central role throughout this study and will continue to inform my work as I build on the ideas that have begun to surface through this investigation.

I have attempted to resist offering concrete or potentially universalized articulations of the configuration, relational interdependence, and work of The Chicago ACT Collective. My insistence on refusing a synthesized set of recommendations is based not only on our collective commitment to avoid didacticism, but also on the awareness that context is imperative in the applicability of any of the concepts and ideas we engage. This is why it is essential that we continue to investigate the development and stifling of creativity and imagination, as these are two desirable qualities that have been and continue to be diminished through most institutional education in favor of assimilation to normative frameworks. The field of art education is concerned with the development of creativity yet, as previously mentioned in Chapter 3, the dominant discourse of creativity and aesthetics are predicated on white supremacist logic. Through these configurations, creativity is perceived to have a precise mode and order of operation. This fallacy perpetuates insecurities and creates wider ruptures that prevent many people from confidently pursuing their creativity and imagination. The absence of clearly defined implications of research may feel unsettling for readers of this study. However, there

may be aspects of this study that invite others to attempt to further research and implement some of the ideas, values, and attunements I have explored. They include the nebulous configuration of the Chicago ACT Collective, expansive approaches to kinship, the importance of care and rest, articulations of coming to know ourselves through relational exchange, and the role of vulnerability in belonging. The ability to translate these concepts to other contexts does not necessarily require a great deal of imagination or creativity; however, for those who have not been adequately guided or encouraged to develop these skills, it may feel like a difficult task. I have seen many of my students at the university level expressing disappointment when they are not handed didactic step-by-step guides for how to implement specific concepts in their own classroom. The desire to center critical awareness and expansive approach to pedagogy causes a sense of friction when students have become socialized through narrow educational approaches that work in service of cultural assimilation that sustains normative structures. I am curious to understand how collectivity shapes and informs creativity and imagination. I suspect that they are related given that meaning is made in relation (Scully, 2021; Simpson, 2017) and that relational interdependence may help us reconfigure normative and hegemonic systems. However, this investigation has prompted numerous additional questions for further inquiry, including a desire to know more about how high school aged students and adults can reconnect with their creative capacity through collective and interrelational spaces both within and outside of academic institutions.

Collectivity is not a new concept. I have explained that there are vastly different approaches to collectivity across history and this practice has been instrumental in the survival of many people. While collectivity is still undertheorized, in my opinion, many people live and practice this way of being in spite of attempts to impose liberal humanist notions of individuality.

In the past few years, I have seen a resurgence in more public interest in this topic. I believe that the effects of an ongoing global pandemic were instrumental in prompting many people to more seriously consider the possibilities of collectivity as a force through which to reimagine and reconfigure centralized systems of power. In the United States specifically, the mismanagement of measures to address the Covid-19 pandemic magnified structural inequities related to essential things like housing, healthcare, employment, and food. These elucidations around the failure of the state to help people meet their basic needs was paired with more examples of necro-politics through the public murders of numerous Black lives at the hands of the police. Under what felt like cataclysmic conditions, people turned their attention toward mutual aid and collectivity as potential solutions to the lack of resources and services available through the state. While many people developed a heightened awareness of inequity as a result of the pandemic, many others, especially those in the most historically marginalized communities in this country, were very aware of these inequities well before the stay-at-home order. However, the applicability and feasibility of collectivity became more broadly apparent, especially in these marginalized communities. More people are taking note, so much so that capitalist market-driven interests have attempted to appropriate these concepts. For example, at some point over the past year, I stumbled across an Applebee's commercial that leaned on notions of community and relationality in their advertisements (Waltz, 2022). Even though they are a national restaurant chain, they have begun to market themselves as a neighborhood eatery and use the language of community while creating the illusion that they have frequent customers in the style of the popular sitcom *Cheers* (Burrows et al., 1982-1993). This is a singular example of how corporations and other normative institutions and structures invested in capitalist interests tend to co-opt potentially liberatory ideals for their own selfish interests. However, if advertising

companies are appropriating these ideals, they must be receiving broad attention. I hope we continue to see more examples of critical approaches to the liberatory possibilities of collectivity in the near future.

I know and have experienced the generative impacts of collectivity. I am committed to continue learning about this transformational approach in order to inspire more people to embrace it. Even though many people are attempting to return to the normative practices to which they were accustomed before the pandemic, we cannot deny that the effects of the past two years have left an impression on our collective consciousness that provokes us to question these practices and approaches to life. We must work to refuse the lure of privileged myopia that sustains complacency. Collectivity is not the singular solution to all systems of oppressive power, but it offers a beautiful reminder of our relational interdependence and may help us lovingly and patiently reconfigure the world to minimize our reliance on centralized systems of control.

Thank you for everything.

Sincerely,

Paulina Camacho Valencia

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